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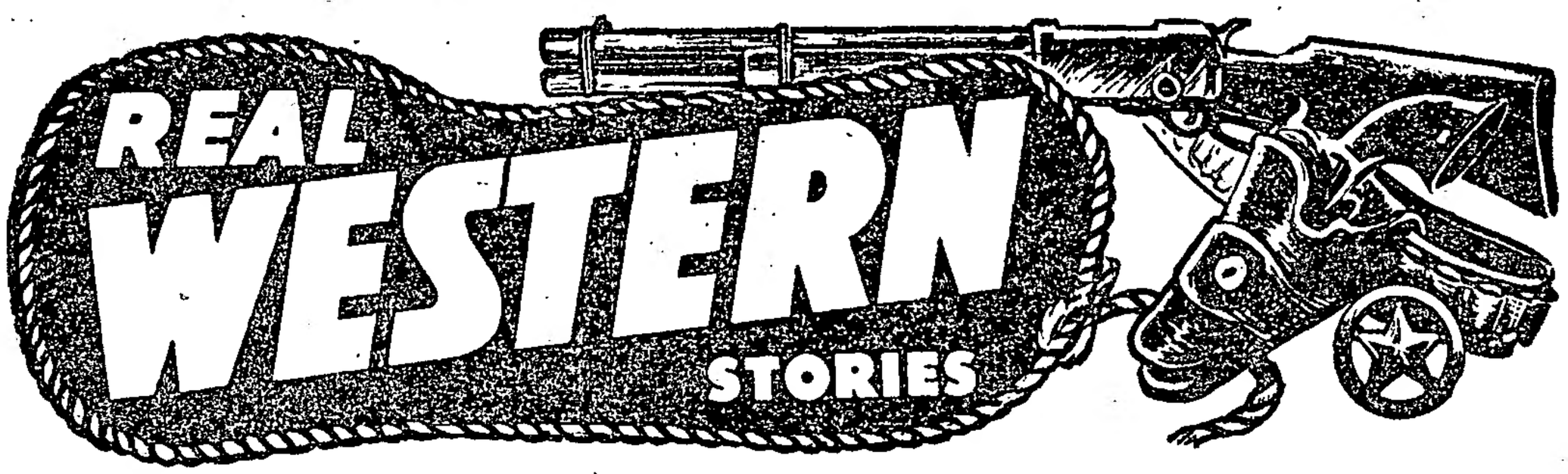

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ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

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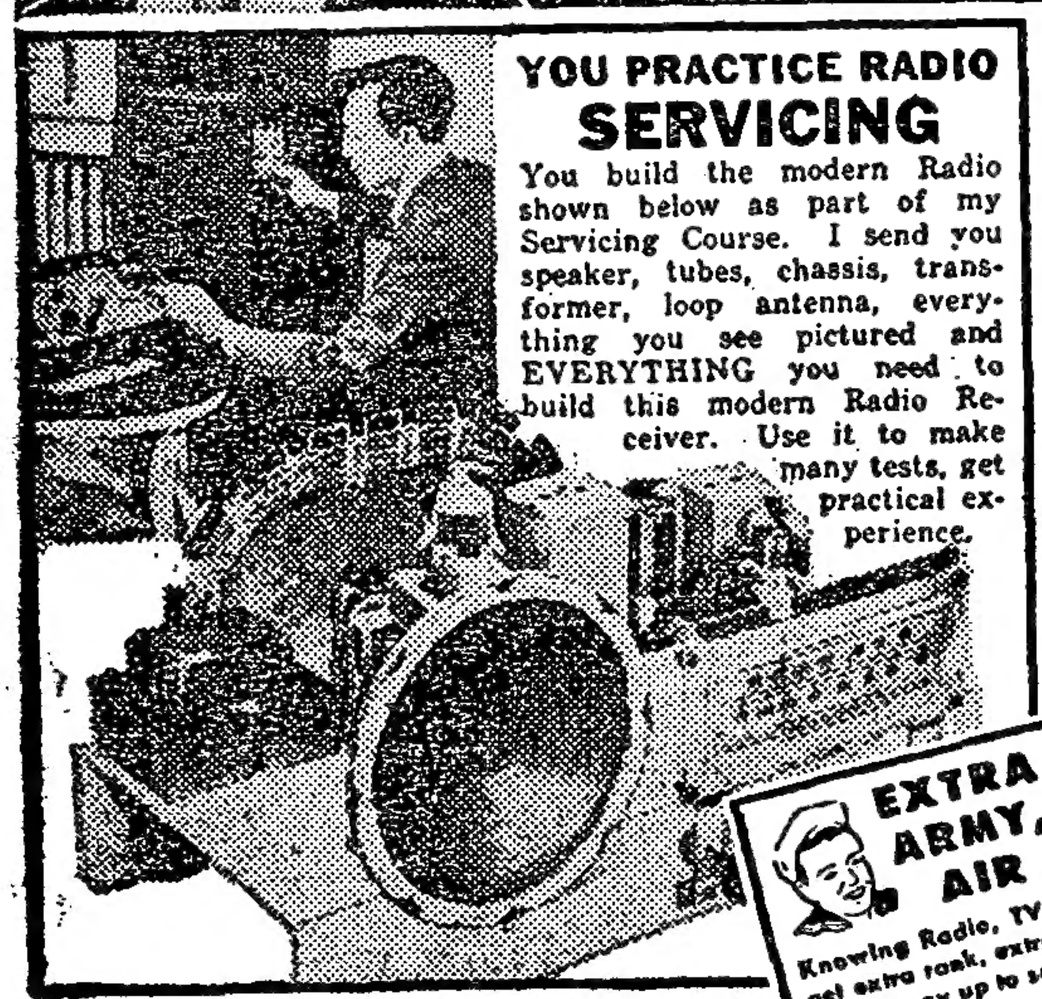

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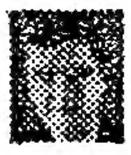

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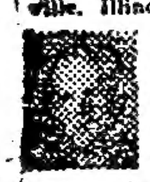

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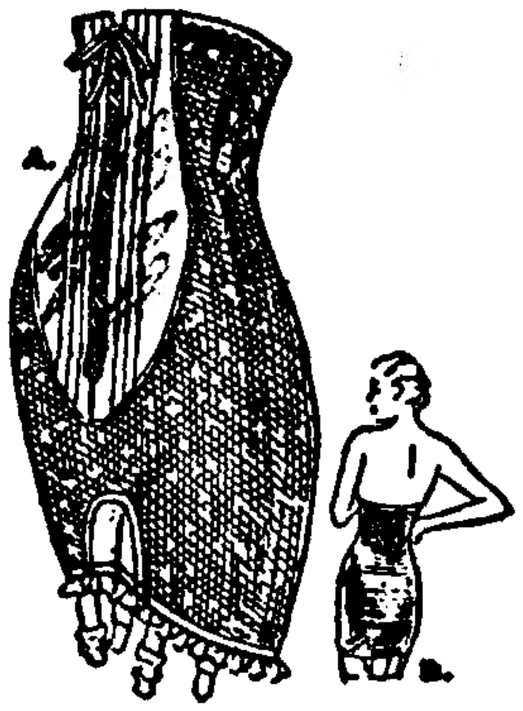

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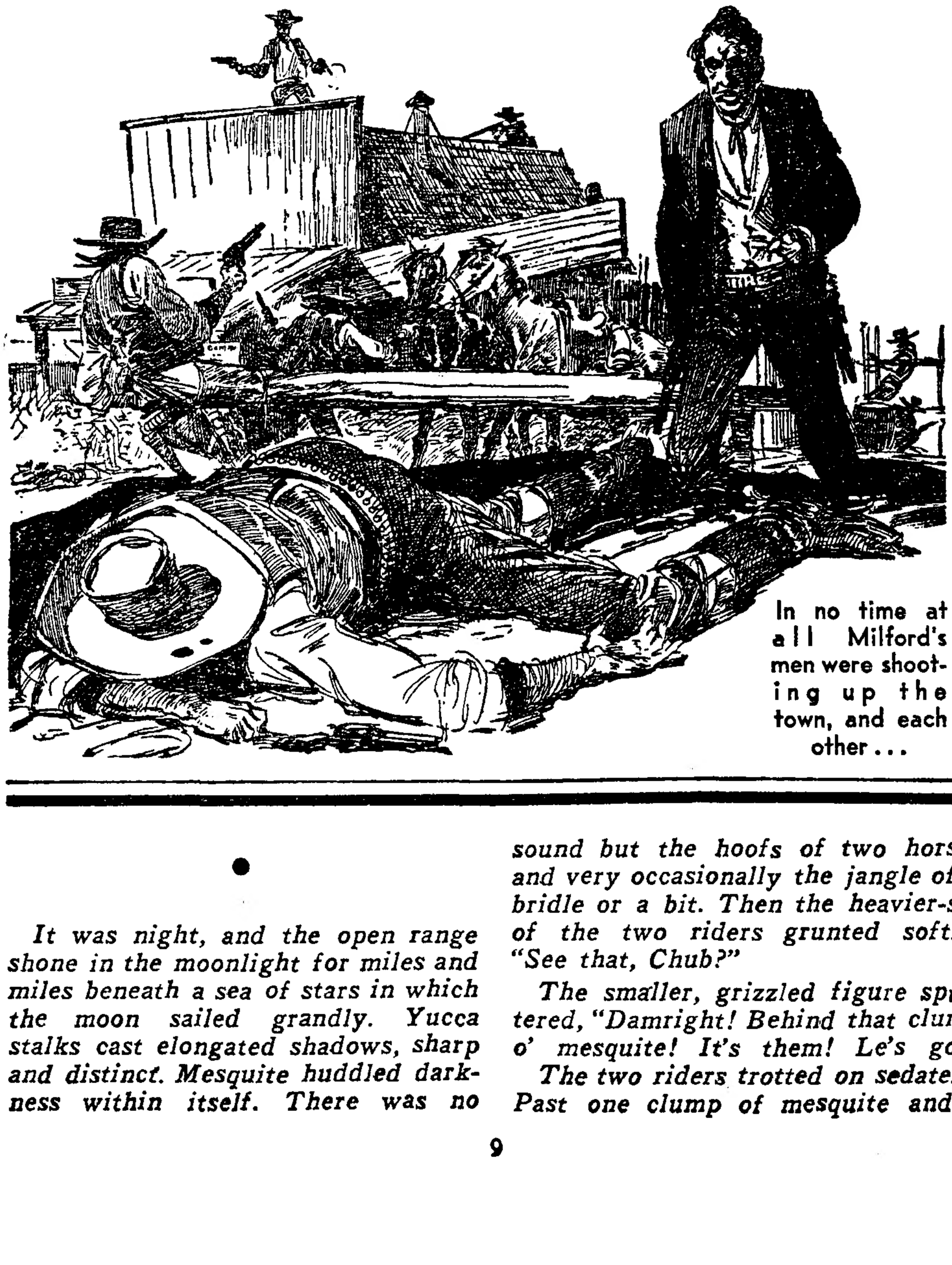
They were two old coots who shouldn't be let out alone, but they sneaked out one night to find the lost Campeador Mine. And when they didn't come back, Bob Sampson and Sally Devers concluded that their fathers *had* found the mine, and had been hi-jacked by Milford's cutthroats. That started hell roaring on the range, and the fires spread farther than anyone could have dreamed!

HELL-ROARIN' RANGE

By MURRAY LEINSTER



In no time at all Milford's men were shooting up the town, and each other . . .

●

It was night, and the open range shone in the moonlight for miles and miles beneath a sea of stars in which the moon sailed grandly. Yucca stalks cast elongated shadows, sharp and distinct. Mesquite huddled darkness within itself. There was no sound but the hoofs of two horses and very occasionally the jangle of a bridle or a bit. Then the heavier-set of the two riders grunted softly, "See that, Chub?"

The smaller, grizzled figure sputtered, "Damright! Behind that clump o' mesquite! It's them! Le's go!"

The two riders trotted on sedately. Past one clump of mesquite and a

huddle of half a dozen flowering stalks of yucca. Up to a second clump of mesquite from behind which the glint of moonlight on metal had momentarily appeared.

They seemed unsuspicious; unwarned; unprepared. It seemed that they would ride past the wide low mass of brittle stalks, as clear targets for the men in ambush. But at the very last instant the heavy-set man grunted again, wordlessly, and as one animal the two horses wheeled. The two riders dug in their spurs.

They swept around the mesquite-clump the long way, their guns out. The guns roared. One of the mounted pair yelled shrilly as yellow flashes darted out from the muzzle of his weapon. The men behind the screen of foliage were taken by surprise. They were armed and ready—but to open fire in another direction entirely. The two horses plunged upon them from behind and smashed into them almost before they could whirl, and certainly before they could be ready for a fight instead of what they had planned.

Sixguns emptied themselves with a roaring ferocity. Then the two riders were through and streaking for the horizon as shaken men on foot hastily poured bullets after them. But one of the riders swayed in his saddle and seemed to fall, though his horse kept on at a breakneck pace. The other horse bucked suddenly. He went bounding crazily for the blue, moonlit distance, bucking as if maddened by a bullet-wound which tormented but did not incapacitate him. The horses did not keep together. They veered apart as if their riders no longer controlled them. But they were out of sight before the raging men on foot could bring their horses out of hiding and mount to ride in pursuit.

●

BOB SAMPSON came up to the ranchhouse—his ranchhouse—and cleared his throat. It was night; there was a moon, and there were several million stars overhead. Over in the corral a calf bawled hysterically and its mother—penned away from it—expressed frenzied maternal solicitude. Bob cleared his throat again. A voice said amusedly from the shadows of the porch, "You ought to take something for that cough, Mr. Sampson."

Bob stiffened, and then grinned. "Maybe, ma'am. What I wanted to say was that we been scoutin' an' ain't found hair nor hide of Pop an' Chub. An' one of my fellas rode over to town an' up to the time he left theah hadn't been any word of 'em theah, either. So I guess everything's all right. They' right tough, those two *hombres*. I don't think you need to worry. Only—nobody knows when they'll be back. They rid off a week ago just oozin' secrecy an' excitement, an' Chub—your pa, ma'am—told me we was all goin' to be millionaires when they come back. They were headin' out to hunt for the Campeador, y'know."

The girl came to the edge of the porch. She smiled ruefully, and a little anxiously. "I know! But my father shouldn't have come back here! That man Milford—"

"Ma'am," said Bob, "my pop is right popular around these parts. If Milford insisted that the sheriff get tough with your father, my pop would start shootin', an' the sheriff would be kinda reluctant to start slingin' lead my pop's way. Theah ain't anybody who'd take it kindly, so I don't think you need to worry about your pa. Chub, he's in good hands."

The girl still smiled, but she said easily, "Still, he did try to shoot that man Milford ten years ago."

"Shucks," said Bob. "That was a good idea, an' most folks are sorry he missed. Nobody ain't goin' to bother Chub! Especially not with my pop ridin' along with him. They' havin' one hell-roarin' time figurin' they' goin' to find the Campeador. They won't, o'course, but they'll have just's much fun as if they did."

The calf bawled, over in the corral. Its mother bellowed in outraged wrath. There was a thumping; she was charging the bars of her pen.

The girl turned her head. Bob told her, "We roped a cow, ma'am, so's you could have some milk for your coffee in the mornin'. We drink ours black, but we thought—"

"It's absurd!" said the girl. But she smiled again, though her eyes were still uneasy. "I come here, looking for my father because he sneaked away on me, and you insist on putting yourself out of your own house so I can stay here and wait for him to come back."

"Boardin'-houses are scarce around these parts," said Bob, "an' you're welcome! A lot more welcome than you'd like me to say."

THERE was silence, a somehow awkward but yet not uncomfortable silence. The girl, Sally Devers, looked at Bob. The situation was not exactly a normal one, but she felt safe and a good deal more glad she'd come than she was willing to admit to herself. The Circle Bar ranchhouse was not a woman's house, of course; Bob and his father had batched it there since Bob was ten years old. But when Sally turned up, half-way indignant and half-way alarmed because her father had ventured back to this part of the world, Bob had made her welcome and explained that his father and hers had gone off into the hills on a quest for the lost Campeador Mine. It was, of course, no promising venture. But Bob's father was hardly a sober-sided citizen, and his old friend Chub Devers was—at sixty and something—as hair-brained as any eighteen-year-old. Ten years since, sputtering, he'd emptied a six-gun at Milford, over in the town of Buckners, because Milford had quite legally swindled him out of every cent he owned. He'd missed every shot, which the county at large thought a pity. But it was a serious matter, because Milford swore he'd been unarmed at the time and invoked the law with a charge of attempted murder. Chub Devers, swindled and in his fifties, had had to light out.

For ten years he'd stayed away with his daughter Sally, now grown up. Wiped out financially, he'd had hard sledding. Only a week since, he'd turned up at the Circle Bar, his whiskers bristling with excitement, and closeted himself with Bob's father. Then the two old-timers set out for the hills. Chub had a clue to the location of the fabled Campeador Mine, one of the legendary lost mines of the southwest. They'd gone off exuberantly, Chub quite forgetting to mention that he'd had to sneak away from Sally because of her firm resolution that he shouldn't go back to the place where he'd been swindled and so nearly had killed the man who'd swindled him. Now—

"You don't suppose," said Sally, after a moment, "you don't think they'll take any risks."

"Ma'am," said Bob, "the Campeador is a outcrop now or nothin'. If you're thinkin' of tunnels cavin' in on 'em, the old tunnels musta collapsed years ago. Theah ain't any danger from that!"

His statement was true enough. The Campeador was real, and so much was known about it. Spaniards had found and worked it in the long, long ago; hostile Indians wiped them out. The mine was lost for two hundred years, but within the past forty, three burro-loads of ore had been taken from it on one occasion, and two burro-loads on another. It was high-grade ore, of a sort to make a prospector's eyes bug out. But the first man to rediscover it had been found dead—with his three burro-loads of ore beside him—and the second man to find it had been so inveterately suspicious that he hadn't filed a location-notice and had gone back to dig out enough ore to make himself rich without sharing his secret with anybody. Several people set out to trail him, and he never came back. Two of the men who were trailing him didn't come back either, and their horses were found running free and riderless; it was easy enough to guess what had happened. Since that time, the Campeador had rated with the Breyfogle and the Lost Niggerhead and Yuma's Chimney as a source of

wealth incalculable, which had only to be found again to make a man rich. But only people very young in heart thought of hunting for it; too many had wasted lifetimes in the search.

CHUB DEVERS, though, would never grow old inside, and Bob Sampson's father was at loose ends with Bob grown old enough to take full charge of the ranch. So it had been a joyous adventure for the two old-timers to ride into the hills on a quest for treasure. Bob wasn't worried, but Sally was.

"Those two," said Bob, "they' cookin' beans an' tappin' rocks an' pretendin' they know somethin' about gold-ore. They're havin' a rip-roarin' good time. They'll be back. You got no need to fret over 'em."

"But it vexes me!" protested Sally. "I've been looking after my dad, and he treats me like a baby."

"Instead of lettin' you treat him like one," said Bob. "Mmmmmh! Who's that?"

The brisk hoofbeats of a trotting horse came toward the ranchhouse. A voice called, "Hey, Bob!"

"Right heah," said Bob.

"I met a fella," said the voice—it was Lem Stuart, the Circle Bar foreman—"over by the Fork. He said your pop an' Chub were raisin' Cain up Contention way, las' night."

Bob said, "Yeah?"

"He said," Lem reported, "they was celebratin' high, wide, an' han'some. They come in uproarious, with bags of wiregold rock on their horses, an' they told all an' sundry they'd found the Campeador an' was headin' for Buckner to file a location-notice, an' meanwhile the drinks were on them. Theah was quite a party!"

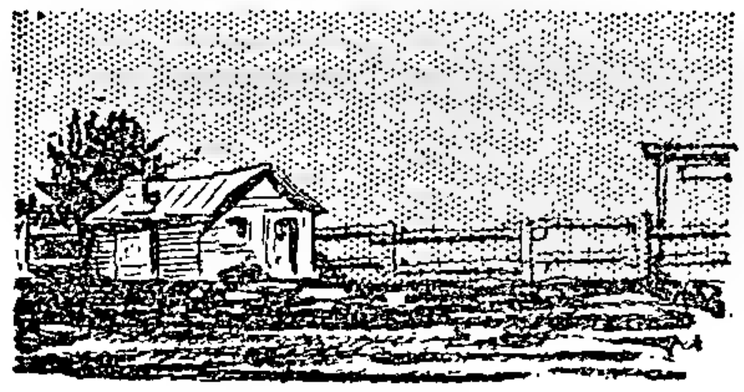
Bob grunted. He felt Sally, behind him, grow tense. "Any more?"

"I reckon," said Lem, "it depen's on what kind of hangover they get what time they get heah. They'll be headin' home boastin' wide an' free. Special Chub. —Uh—the fella said he was feelin' extra good. He was tellin' the world that now he was a rich man an' could hire lawyers to git him off, he was gonna shoot some holes in Milford to prove his shootin' had improved since ten years ago."

By Lem's tone he was grinning. Bob grinned, too. But Sally didn't; she caught her breath.

"Those two," said Bob, "they might ha' found the Campeador, an' they might not. If they gave up lookin', they wouldn't let on. Not them! They'd pull a bluff an' have the whole county runnin' around in a lather tryin' to horn in on the strike they hadn't made, just so nobody could kid 'em."

Lem chuckled and reined aside to go to the bunkhouse. Bob said com-



fortably to Sally, "Theah! Your worries are over. They'll blow in some time tonight. I bet they try to make us believe—"

But Sally said in a strained voice, "Bob! Do you—do you think we could go to meet them?"

"Why?" asked Bob, startled.

"Because I think they really have found the Campeador. Dad had —he had a very good hunch—an old Spanish map. I didn't think he'd risk coming back here to try hunting, but he—he really thought he knew where it was. And I'm afraid he did find it."

"Scared he found it?" said Bob blankly. "Why scared?"

"Because he hates Milford," said Sally miserably. "We had a nice ranch once; Milford bilked Dad out of it. And Dad's always sworn that one day he'd get even. He was always saying. he'd put up an offer of a thousand dollars reward for Milford's ears—if he ever got a thousand dollars. I—I just don't know what he'll do if he's really found the Campeador!"

Bob regarded her amazedly, "But—"

"Please!" she said urgently. Feverishly. "If my Dad thinks he's rich—

You see, when Milford swindled him, Dad didn't have money to fight back with. If he'd had enough money, he might have been able to upset the whole swindle. And ever since then he's sworn solemnly that he was out to get rich because he considers that a rich man can get away with anything! And I—I don't know how much he's in earnest!"

Bob considered. "Uh—d'you think you an' me would be enough to stop 'im?"

"I—I don't know..."

Bob grunted. "Mmmm... I'll go get some volunteers," he said. "The point is that if my pop an' your pa *did* find the Campeador, we may have to rope an' tie your pa to keep him from offerin' that reward for Milford's ears an' then goin' in to collect it personal. Right?"

"He's—he's nice," said Sally tremulously; "but Milford did swindle him so badly, Bob! I'm afraid of what he may do. Honestly I am!"

"Get set for the ridin', then", Bob commanded. "We're leavin' on the jump. They'd be comin' home 'way of the Fork, where Lem met that fella."

HE WENT toward the bunkhouse where he was sleeping these days, while Sally occupied the ranchhouse proper. He went in. Lem was retelling his story of the high jinks in Contention, in celebration of the re-discovery of the Campeador. Men listened admiringly. Bob said, "Lem, was there somethin' you didn't tell me just now?"

Lem nodded. "Yeah. The fella who told me was one of Milford's men. You know the kinda fellas Milford hires. An' he was heading for Buckners."

Bob's face darkened. Milford was a rich man now. He'd started out poor and tricky but strictly legal in all his dealings. Now he was rich and still tricky, and not so particular about legality. A man who'd acquired four ranches from bitterly-resentful former owners, and ran the biggest dance-hall and the biggest gambling-house in Buckners, and felt himself the biggest man in the country roundabout—such a man would come to feel that he was above the law. But he'd need employees of a particular stripe after he'd acquired that conviction. Especially after he'd acquired the enemies Milford had now. As a matter of mere business policy, Milford now employed a small army of gunmen in the conduct of his business. As a further stroke of policy he'd used those gunmen—in part—to get a man of his own choice elected Sheriff. So that Milford was very powerful indeed, but to say that a man worked for him was an unflattering summing-up of that man's character and worth.

"He'll be tellin' that in Buckners," said Bob shortly. "He'll have got theah by now. Or maybe the word got theah even earlier. If Pop an' Chub come home by the Fork they could be headed off from Buckners."

He looked around the bunkhouse. Silence fell; not a pleasant silence.

"I think," said Bob, "I'll go out an' meet 'em. Anybody want to come along as a welcomin' committee?"

Three men stood up and reached for their ropes, hanging on the bunkhouse wall. A fourth man started to pull on his boots. A fifth and sixth and seventh man fumbled for gunbelts. An eighth man picked up a rifle, too, but Bob shook his head.

"We'll go the way they oughta come. Somebody'd better stay home in case they' cagey an' come home roundabout. But only Gawd knows whether they'll act sensible an' sneak home guilty or whether they'll ride into Buckners an' try to turn it upside down just because they' feelin' good. If they do get home, us missin' them, you ride after us an' let us know."

The eighth man looked disappointed, but he said, "Which way you' goin', so I can find you?"

"We," said Bob, "are goin' to take the trail a gang of Milford's men would take, if they went outa Buckners to—uh—arrest Chub for shootin' at Milford ten years ago. An'—uh—

for findin' the Campeador. I figure Milford 'ud tell 'em to ask Chub wheah he's been the past ten years, and particular the last four-five days." Then he paused and said significantly. "Uh—Sally's ridin' with us. She figures she's got to keep Chub from gettin' rash, now he's got money to get out of trouble with. Remember that, fellas, in—uh—conversation."

HE TOOK down his own rope from the wall. With the rest, he trooped over to the corral to rope and saddle a horse, and then an extra one for Sally. It was all very unhurried and casual, but eight men don't usually get nine horses saddled and ready to go in five minutes. Nor do they always wear their sixguns on a commonplace errand at night.

There wasn't a word of anything but hilarious anticipation, though, when Sally mounted and came riding to join them from the ranchhouse.

Nine riders, then, swept away from the ranchbuildings and trotted briskly away over the moonlit range. There were stars by millions overhead. There was the night-chill in the air, and the smell of horse-flesh and grass and—now and again—a whiff of cattle. Sally rode beside Bob, completely comforted by her escort of grinning and seemingly carefree men. She looked appealingly at Bob.

"It seems so—so silly!" she said ruefully, "to go to all this trouble just to keep my dad from doing something foolish!"

"Shucks," said Bob. "The fellas are goin' to kid Pop an' Chub to death! They' goin' to tell 'em theah's nine hundred outlaws banded together to hold 'em up an' steal the ore-samples in their saddlebags!"

He bent forward to adjust something on the pommel of his saddle. It looked like that. But actually, he moved to shift his rope so that it would conceal from Sally the fact that his rifle-holster was slung to his saddle, and that it had a Winchester, ready-loaded, in it.

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DAWN CAME. The sky grew lighter to the east; sunrise colorings appeared, and deepened, and the stars paled and vanished and the sky became very blue. Then for a little while the range looked oddly unreal, in the lucent twilight which comes just before the sun. For a matter of minutes Bob's horse, with him on it, looked rather like a centaur, and the range itself like a never-never land in which practically anything was rather more likely than not.

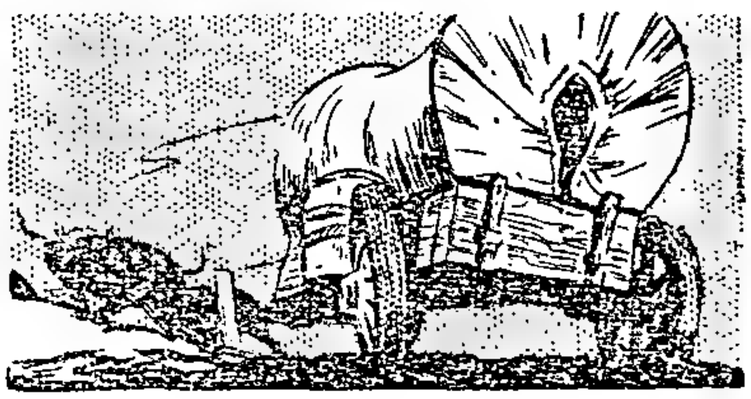
But as the light strengthened, and at last the red disc of the sun itself appeared over the world's rim, Bob's horse became again a horse and nothing more. The red rays of the new-risen sun shone upon him and showed faintly grim lines about his mouth, even as he explained in seeming amusement to Sally. "They' goin' to have the laugh on us. I bet they're sleepin' peaceful in Contention, havin' carried on the party an extra day."

She looked tired and a little frightened. "Do you really think so? You don't think we just missed them?"

"Shucks!" said Bob easily. "We spread out a quarter-mile apart. If they came through the Fork an' headed for Buckners or home, we'd ha' met 'em. Either they' sleepin' peaceful in Contention, aimin' to fill up on ham an' eggs an' ride home triumphant today, or else they took a short cut—"

He stopped. Far away—nearly a mile away—one of his men had ridden into view. Buck saw him aim his sixgun at the sky and let it go. He saw the tiny puff of smoke, tinted golden by the sun's still-ruddy rays. That was a summons. Bob's jaws set hard. "Somebody's found somethin'," he said briefly. "Come on!"

He was heading for the distant man before the faint and muted "pop" of the gun had reached him. Then he saw what the other man had found. It was a riderless horse, limping and exhausted, trailing at the end of a lariat; as Bob stared, the color went out of his face. Sally pounded along beside him, looking at him from time to time. She saw



this new expression, pinched and drawn. He drove his horse ruthlessly for speed.

"Bob!" she panted. "What is it? What's happened?"

"That's my Pop's horse," said Bob harshly, "an' my Pop's saddle. But he ain't in it!"

He used his spurs. His horse put its belly to the ground and fairly flew.

When Sally reached the spot, Bob had dismounted and was examining the horse with grim attention. He looked up, ashen under his tan. "It's Pop's horse all right," he told her through stiff lips. "An' theah's blood on the saddle."

Sally caught her breath. Bob's nostrils widened and his cheeks were very pale indeed, but he said evenly, "No sign of Chub. We'll go lookin'."

Other riders came up. Word passed among them swiftly. One man started to swear in a rage-thickened voice, and then stopped short—because of Sally. Bob scanned the sky. A moment's bewilderment, and Sally understood why. Her heart seemed to stop.

"He wasn't dragged," said Bob harshly, after an instant. He gave no sign of relief at the sight of a buzzard soaring overhead, but the relief was enormous. If there were a dead man on the range, there would be no buzzards in sight. One would drop; the next would see it, and the next would see that. The sky would be clear of the foul vultures for twenty miles around. "No, he wasn't dragged. No marks on the stirrup. An' he ain't dead an' layin' out; we'll see if we can back-trail that horse."

IT WASN'T easy, but the place where they found the horse told them that Bob's father and Chub had started out on the normal route from Contention. They spread out and followed that way back. Toward Contention. Now and again a man waved. He'd found horse-tracks that would be those of the limping, wounded animal. A bullet had nicked the horse's hock—enough to make it limp and favor the injured foot, but not enough to constitute a serious hurt. The tracks told that whatever had happened, had happened on beyond. But this was almost a throughfare. There was no road, of course; this was open range. But for a long time riders had traveled more or less along the same path and there was sign on the ground all along.

An hour after sunrise a man holloa'd, off to the right. Bob rode to the spot. Beside a mesquite-clump there were fresh markings. The prints of high-heeled riders' boots. The mesquite-stalks, themselves, were broken where horses had been hidden in the middle of the clump, and there were fresh empty shells on the ground. There had been shooting here—last night.

"Five-six fellas waited heah," said Bob steadily, though his eyes burned. "Not too long, prob'ly. There's some cigarette butts. Not too many. There's a couple put out an' stamped on, hardly lighted; that musta been when the folks they were waitin' for come in sight."

He rode around the mesquite-clump, saw the tracks of two horses. Where they rode up, where they wheeled suddenly, and the deep prints whre they sprinted for speed and broke into the ambush like a whirlwind.

"That'll be Pop an' Chub," he said between his teeth. "They were ridin' home. Somethin' tipped 'em there was fellas waitin' behind this mes-

quite. Most folks woulda turned around an' rid off. Those two—they went hell-roarin' ahead."

He found where bullets had ploughed into the earth from the height of a horse's back.

"They went in shootin'," he said evenly. A smudge of brown-red on the earth gave him some satisfaction. "They hit somebody heah! Then they went off an' these fellas pumped lead after 'em, an' then—" The splintered mesquite-stalks told this story—"they dragged theah horses out an' lit out after 'em."

He paused deliberately. "I reckon," he said softly, "we go in to Buckners an' start askin' questions of the Sheriff an' Mistuh Milford. Fast!"

He did not consult his followers—not even Lem Stuart. He did not express any solicitude for Sally, who had been in the saddle all night. He turned his tired horse for Buckners and rode steadily. His reasoning was air-tight. Chub Devers was technically wanted for attempted murder; there was a legal excuse for a sheriff's posse to arrest him—and the Sheriff was Milford's man. Chub and Bob's father had, together, found the Campeador Mine, or at least had announced that they had found it. If the two of them could be siezed and their possessions examined, a copy of the location-notice and a description of its position suitable for filing in the courthouse should certainly be found. If not that, then there are tortures that can be used to loosen almost any tongue, and a man can be killed, even two men. The Campeador would then belong to the man who first filed an accurate description of where it was to be found.

If the Sheriff didn't have enough men to take care of the two old-timers, Milford could lend him more, but he'd probably use the Sheriff to make the capture in any case—just for the protective coloration of the law. Once the two men were prisoners, of course, the law would be forgotten. If Pop Sampson and Chub Devers had found the Campeador and had wiregold samples to prove it, the torments of the Indians would be used to make them talk, and they would be killed afterwards to keep them from telling about it—as well as to leave Milford a perfectly clear field for the re-"discovery" of the Campeador. It was a perfectly obvious sequence of motives and actions and causes and effects. But Bob meant to break it by the instant confrontation of the Sheriff and Milford. Of course his father was wounded; he might be dead. Chub—Sally's father—might be wounded or dead, too. If the Sheriff had found out at once what Milford wanted—the secret of the Campeador—both were almost certainly dead and buried, by now.

RIDING toward the county-seat of Buckners County, eight men and a white-faced girl were grim and nearly without hope. The two hell-raising cattlemen, who'd been celebrating uproariously in Contention forty-eight hours ago, were missing—after an ambush and the flinging of much lead. A riderless horse, and blood on that horse's saddle, might be all that was ever positively known about their fate.

Except, of course, that some day, somehow, sooner or later, Milford would turn up as the owner of the reopened Campeador Mine. There would be no proof of his share in any foul play. Two men would have vanished; that would be all. It would be the smartest and perhaps the most fool-proof of all his coups. And so far there was nothing that could be done save bluff. Pop Sampson and Chub might at this very moment be undergoing tortures devised by Indian squaws in olden days. Or that torture might be finished and the two of them lying in unmarked shallow graves. There might never be any proof of anything at all, against anybody.....

It was maddening to be sure, and to know of no evidence against either the Sheriff or Milford. The members of the cavalcade were raging and daunted and baffled as they rode on. Presently they topped a rise and Buckners lay spread out

below. It was a typical cowtown, save that there was no railroad there and hence no array of shipping-pens and corrals nor the varied supplies of a railroad settlement. It was a place to which ranchers came for merely standard equipment, and where rangehands found refreshment and recreation. In its two or three hundred houses, therefore, were concentrated the iniquities of a much larger town, and it would be—had been—much more readily reduced to the status of a place controlled absolutely by one man. That man was Milford.

Bob reined in. "Somethin's happened to Pop an' Chub," he said measuredly, "but we can't prove it. It ain't likely they were brought heah to jail; too many folks 'ud know about it. One or both of them could be holed up anywhere in charge o' Milford's men. You know the rest of that. The Sheriff's a crook; you know that too. The only thing we can do to make Pop and Chub safer is to make Milford an' the Sheriff unsafe. Which is goin' to be a tight business. You, Lem, you take Sally off. If Milford is pullin' what we think, he'd like nothin' better than to lay han's on her. See?"

"Yeah," said Lem. "But—"

"I won't go!" said Sally fiercely. "I won't—"

Lem reached over reluctantly and took her bridle-rein. She whipped out a tiny pistol. "I—I'll shoot my horse!" she cried as fiercely as before.

She meant it. A dead horse would do nobody any good, and it wouldn't add to Sally's safety, either; Bob shook his head impatiently and changed his plan.

"A'right. Lem, you an' Sally an' three fellas wait heah. Get set. If we come out fast, you start shootin' to stop folks chasin' us. If we don't come out, you take Sally to Contention or somewheres safe an' see what the honest cattlemen around heah can do about this business. It won't be much," he added grimly, "but it's all I can figure out so far ahead. You, Sally, stay heah. If we do come out a'runnin', extra guns openin' up to help us will do us more good than extra guns in town. The fewer of us go in, the less it'll look like we aim to start somethin'."

HE RODE OFF—and then had to turn back three men by name. All would have followed him. Which was something of a tribute, had he thought of it. The foray into Buckners would be dangerous. There'd be a half a dozen men or more, around Milford's gambling-house and dance-hall, who drew their pay for being ready to use their guns. There'd be other men in town from some of Milford's ranches, and they had been chosen less for their ability as rangehands than for their willingness to fight. The Sheriff, too, would have the law on his side, and men who'd take up arms at his command. There'd be plenty of guns ready to throw lead if Bob and his followers made one move out of line.

But they trotted down the dusty main street on their weary horses, dust-covered and sweating and formidable. It was still not past midmorning. There were few people in the streets. The compact knot of Circle Bar riders did not look alarming. They rode quietly enough to the front of Milford's dance-hall. There was no festivity there as yet, of course, but the bar was open. When they went in, Milford was seated at a table in the back, eating his breakfast. The dance-floor was empty and the tables at which the patrons sat with the dance-hall girls were forlorn, with the chairs piled on them so the floor could be swept. There is no place quite so desolate as one where professional hilarity reigns, out of business hours.

Bob and his three men went comfortably to the bar. Somebody went quickly out the back. Bob signalled the bartender for drinks. The four of them drank. Bob put down his glass and walked casually back to where Milford breakfasted. He said quietly, "Mistuh Milford, I aim to do somethin' right lawless."

Milford jerked his head up, startled. Men came in the back door.

Bob stirred—and his sixgun was out and bearing steadily on Milford, its hammer at full cock and held there by Bob's thumb curled around it.

"I aim," said Bob as quietly as before, "to kill you if you don't come ridin' with me, Mistuh Milford. An' if one of those fellas of yours should happen to shoot me, this gun will go off an' kill you anyways."

There was a little stirring over by the bar, and Bob's three men had their guns out—aimed at Milford. Bob was not in the line of fire.

"An'," added Bob, "if one of 'em thinks a lot of his shootin', an' tries to hit my gun, there are three other guns trained on you. It ain't likely you'll—uh—survive the ruckus. If I was you, Mistuh Milford, I'd tell 'em to stay peaceable."

But there was no need for that. Milford went very white. He sat absolutely still, his hands in plain view on the table. "What the hell's this?" he demanded. His voice, somehow, did not sound as menacing as he could have wished.

"My pop," said Bob, "an' Chub Devers, they' vanished. I suspec' the Sheriff knows how, an' wheah they are now. You' a good friend of the Sheriff. You're goin' to use your—uh—influence with him to get him to turn 'em loose. Get up!"

He reached over and lifted Milford from his chair, with a firm grip on the back of his neck. The chair clattered to the floor. Bob tapped Milford's coat with the back of his hand, once his prisoner was shakily on his feet. "No gun?" he asked ironically. "You depen' on your friends. That's too bad! Let's hope the Sheriff don't fail you! Go out the front door, now!"

IT WAS an odd spectacle. There had been two men at the bar before Bob and his followers entered; four others had come in, watchfully, the instant before he drew. And there was the bartender. All of them were Milford's men, but they stood helpless while Milford was marched out. If he were killed, they would be in an uncomfortable state. But they could not lift a finger to prevent this open kidnapping.

Outside, Bob nodded toward a horse beside his own party's four. "That horse's from one of your own ranches, Mistuh Milford," he said softly. "It won't be stealin' for you to take it; climb up in the saddle."

Two of Bob's men fairly hoisted him into place. He was gray-faced, now. The four Circle Bar men closed about him, guns out. And the town was coming alive; word seemed to pass magically from house to house. Heads peered out of windows as the small cavalcade trotted deliberately down the street. Before it had gone a hundred yards, the plank sidewalks were lined with staring figures. Milford was the man who ran Buckners. He would pay lavishly if anybody succeeded in rescuing him—but there was no way to free him without getting him killed in the process.

The five horsemen rode between rows of false-front houses and gaping men on foot. They reached the jail. Bob swung easily out of his saddle and went into the Sheriff's office. It was empty. He glanced swiftly around. The desk, the two chairs, a faded, fly-specked calendar, a dusty row of files containing wanted posters and the like. A line of pegs in the wall. Bob examined the pegs coldly. The Sheriff's own rifle and some extras for deputies ordinarily hung on those pegs. The signs were plain in a thin film of dust on the top of each peg; guns had been hung there, recently, and had recently been removed. The Sheriff was gone, and with a posse.

But Bob inspected the cells, to make sure. All were empty. His father and Chub Devers were not imprisoned here.

He went out, his eyes burning. "Mistuh Milford, suh," he said softly, "it looks like the Sheriff had orders to catch my Pop an' Chub

Devers an'—uh—find out from them what was wanted without bringin' 'em into jail. So I'm suggestin' that you call one of your friends and get word sent to the Sheriff—an' fast!—that he'd better bring Pop an' Chub over to the Circle Bar, because if they don't get back there, you ain't ever goin' to leave it."

Milford licked his lips. A man can feel that he is the biggest man in a county and above the law, and grow very arrogant and ruthless—while he has a small army of gunmen at his back. But four sixguns held on him, ready to let out his life at an untoward movement or any any attempt at rescue, produce a marked effect. He begins to feel a great deal smaller. Milford did. "I'll—send a message," he said thinly, "but—you know you're getting into trouble!"

The last was an attempt at threat, but Milford was too scared to make it sound like one. Bob beckoned, to a watching man.

"Will this man do?" he asked with elaborate politeness. "If so, you give him the message to the Sheriff, suh."

MILFORD gave the message, in a sudden desperate urgency. The man who was to take the message scowled worriedly. Milford was being snatched from his own stronghold, carried away with at least two dozen presumably loyal men of his following looking on. He was hideously scared; he would avenge his disgrace presently on those who had witnessed it—if he were lucky. Now he stammered sweatingly earnest commands. The Sheriff was to be hunted for and found, and told that if he had Pop Sampson and Chub Devers as prisoners, he was to bring them immediately to the Circle Bar. Because if he didn't, Milford would be killed.

Riding out of town, with dust kicking up behind their horses' hoofs and the sun approaching the monstrous heat of midday, Bob said coldly to Milford, "I reckon, Mistuh Milford, that you figure that if the Sheriff swaps you free at the Circle Bar he'll have got enough of your han's to wipe 'em out again, with all of us. Or at the worst, if the Sheriff turns up with a kinda army of your men, my fellas will turn you loose to keep from gettin' killed. If you had those ideas, forget 'em. I'm goin' to take you up the hills wheah we ain't likely to be bothered, an' stake you out an' come back every day or so until either my Pop an' Chub are turned loose, or you tell me wheah the Sheriff would ha' taken 'em."

He paused and added, "O'course, if you've got an idea now, an' want to tell me, it might save trouble."

Milford had been ghastly to look at; now his face was almost pitiable. He began to babble in awful terror. But all his babblings were protests that he didn't know where to find the Sheriff, and panic-stricken pleadings that he shouldn't be staked out in the sun. His terror was convincing; it looked as if the Sheriff had gone out with his orders, and would return only after he'd gotten the information Milford wanted and after Pop and Chub were dead and buried. From Milford's standpoint, that would have been the logical procedure; it would leave him in the clear. But it didn't leave him in the clear, now. If nobody knew where the Sheriff could be found, and if he wasn't found in time...

But Bob felt his heart constrict at the sight of Milford's desperation. It looked like having Milford as a hostage would be completely useless; it seemed that he had accomplished nothing except the placing of himself and his followers wholly outside the law, and that the chances of saving the two oldtimers' lives were simply non-existent.

●

It was hot in the arroyo, and the single horseman sweated profusely as he turned his horse into it, scanning the sunbaked earth before him. There were fresh scuffings on the hard, dry clay. The horseman loosened his rifle in its scabbard. He rode on, his eyes moving here and there. He used his neckerchief free-

ly to dry the sweat that threatened to roll down into his eyes. He swore almost as freely—at the Sheriff and Milford and the task of hunting humans in these arid hills. But he kept on.

The steep sides of the gulch rose above his horse's head. Then they were two horse-heights high; then they were five. The arroyo became a sort of minor box-canyon, whose walls reflected sunlight with the effective temperature of an oven. The glare was unbearable and the heat intolerable. The horse drooped and the rider spurred it peevishly as if taking out upon his mount his own irritation and discomfort.

Half a mile from its mouth, the arroyo widened into a shallow basin, almost circular, with precipitous walls a quarter-mile apart and sixty feet high. The rider stared about him. There was no exit except the passage by which he had entered, but the new tracks in the hard ground remained. Sweating and swearing, he followed them, though now with plain uneasiness.

He was in the very middle of the basin when his horse stumbled and went down in one motion. It lay still, not even kicking; then the echoes of a rifle-shot rolled back and forth between the clifflike basin walls.

The rider rolled clear, jerking out his sixguns. He could not get at the rifle; that was pinned down by the weight of his dead horse.

There was a spurt of dust, nearby; the noise of the shot followed an instant later. Another spurt of dust; a third. The shots came all from one direction. The dismounted man flung himself behind his horse, staring desperately for some sign of where the bullets came from. Fallen boulders and detritus at the base of the basin walls would offer ambush for fifty men. The top of the rim could hide a hundred more.

There was silence. Stillness so complete that it seemed to rack one's ear-drums. There was no sound anywhere in all the world.

After a long, long time the dismounted man stood up, as if assured that whoever had shot his horse had gone away.

Bullets sang around him. He dived to cover once more.

An hour later a bullet spat up the dust behind his barricade. Someone had gotten around behind him, so the carcass of his horse was no longer a protection. He scrambled to the other side. A bullet flicked up a tiny white column of powder there, too. There was no shelter for him. He was in the open, with marksmen commanding his every possibe movement.

He stood up and shouted furiously at the silence, "A'right! You can kill me! Why don't you? What' you want? What the hell you want?"

As he stood there, shaking with rage and something very much like despair, a man appeared by the basin wall. He was unarmed, had one arm in a sling. He held the other arm high as he advanced reluctantly toward the man in the middle of the basin. The man in the middle knew him. His mouth dropped open; his predicament, he realized, was worse than he'd suspected.

3

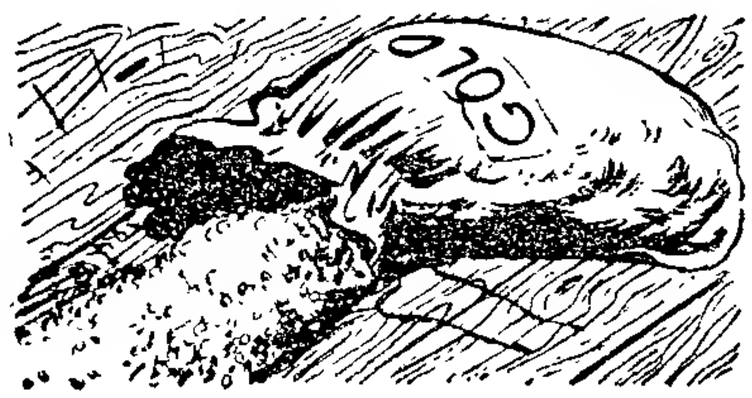
THERE came the brisk, staccato clackings of a horse's hoofs on stone. By their timbre, they were far away and this was a many-times-re-echoed echo of their sound. The sun had set a quarter of an hour since, and all the hills about Bob's party were bathed in pinkish light from the west, though the sky overhead was already dark. The sound of echoed hoof-beats ceased abruptly. There was stillness. Bob said to Sally, "That's Lem."

Lem Stuart had gone to the Circle Bar for food and blankets. With Milford a prisoner in their midst, it

was not wise for Circle Bar men to go where they could be hemmed in. At least forty riders could be mustered for any enterprise Milford commanded, from his own ranches. With kindred spirits the Sheriff could deputize, a force could be raised against which the Circle Bar simply could not be held. The exchange of Milford for Pop Sampson and Chub would not do much good if they, and Bob, and Sally, and all the Circle Bar hands, were wiped out immediately afterward in a storming of the Circle Bar ranchhouse. So Bob had led his followers into the hills with Milford sinking ever deeper into absolute panic, while Lem went off for needed supplies.

Now Bob and the others waited, as the pink light faded and darkness gathered in the bottom of the draw where they had stopped. Bob was taut and tense. Sweat tended to gather on his forehead every time he pictured his father and Chub in the hands of the gang that had ambushed them the night before. It should have been an absolutely perfect coup. Two old-timers, riding out of Contention after uproarious celebration, should simply have vanished from the face of the earth. There should have been no word or clue or question about them for weeks to come. Ultimately the Campeador should have been discovered by somebody who would promptly assign it to Milford. The fate of Pop Sampson and Chub Devers should have been just another of those mysteries that people forget after a while, because there is nothing to hang a story on.

Sally's anxiety about her father had led to the discovery of the ambush and then to all that had followed up to now. But it was a grim business to think of the persuasions that might be applied by Milford's men to make their captives talk—if they hadn't already been applied, or if they weren't being applied right now.



THE SOUND of hoofbeats came again, but changed. This time it was no single horse, but many. The sound was that of men in pursuit. The noise was many times echoed, like the first, and it was impossible to guess the distance between those who heard it and its source. But it was certain that at least a dozen mounts had just passed the spot from which some natural whispering gallery had reflected the sound of Stuart's passage.

Bob listened. He said to Milford, without heat, "That's your friends, Milford. But it don't sound like they' comin' peaceable to get you outa trouble."

He turned to his horse and tightened the girth of his saddle, previously loosened to allow of rest while Lem was waited for. The others of the party made similar preparations for hard riding. There was, too, a loosening of guns in holsters.

"Maybe we can dodge a gun-fight," said Bob drily. "We don't want one. Lem'll get heah first. We'll see what he says. But— Mmmmmm..." He already knew approximately what he would do to avoid a pitched battle from which nothing could be gained. "I reckon we'll fix up Mistuh Milford so he won't be tempted to holler to his friends if we start playin' blind-man's-buff back yonder."

He watched with hard eyes as Milford was gagged.

"It's my guess, Milford," he said, his voice very steady and very deadly, "that the Sheriff may have been a mite too—uh—enthusiastic about carryin' out his orders about my Pop an' Chub. It's my guess that he's chasin' Lem because he can't swap you loose. But if he's a'ready killed Pop an' Chub... You think it over!"

His nostrils flared in the gathering dark. He had very little hope indeed. The ambush must have been laid and his father and Chub Devers captured at least eighteen hours before; in eighteen hours the unspeak-

able might have happened. Perhaps by this time Bob should hope that his father was dead. He felt the horrible impotence of a man who has reason to despair of everything but vengeance, and lacks the proof which would justify that.

Now there was silence among the hills, save for occasional uneasy movements of the horses who waited Lem Stuart's coming. Sally moved close to Bob. Her voice trembled, "Bob! Do you—do you really think they're—dead?"

He said in a low tone. "I want Milford to think I think so." He went on untruthfully, to spare her his own despair. "But they' two spry an' smart old-timers; they'll kid those fellas along. They'll fool 'em somehow. But we got our part to do, too, an' Milford is an ace in the hole just as long as he's scared to death."

Sally said uneasily, "But wouldn't it have been simpler to spread the story of what happened before—all this? You said your father had a lot of friends. Wouldn't they scour all the county for him if you asked them?"

"It would take weeks to hunt the hills, no matter how many men were doin' it," said Bob. "The only chance we had was to grab Milford, throw a scare into him, an' have him crazy to get Pop an' Chub turned loose. Otherwise the Sheriff would ha' shot 'em an' buried 'em some place where we'd never find 'em. This way, anyhow, they won't try that!" Then he added; "Better get on your horse. We'll be ridin' soon. We got to shake the fellas that are chasin' Lem."

HE SWUNG up on his own animal. He'd caught the first faint clatter of hoofs nearby—a single horse. He rode forward in the dim dusk to meet Lem Stuart.

"Theah's a gang trailin' me," reported Lem. "I thought I'd better use the daylight to find you, an' then we could use the darkness to lose them."

Bob said, "Any word?" He meant it as a question on whether the Sheriff had sent a messenger to the Circle Bar, agreeing to exchange his father and Chub for Milford. But he knew that Lem would have told him that first of all.

"No word," said Lem. "Fellas were watchin' the ranchhouse. I got through 'em, ridin' in. Nobody at the house a'tall. That was all right, but they started closin' in on me when I started to come out. I had to shoot up one fella right thorough to get away."

"That means the Sheriff knows we got Milford," said Bob. "An' it proves he can't swap Pop an' Chub to get him back. So they' dead." He added evenly. "No sign at all of the fella we left home?"

"Nary hair nor hide of 'im," said Lem. "What' you goin' to do, Bob?"

"I'm goin' to slip these fellas," Bob told him, "an' get Sally off somewheres where she'll be safe, an' then make Milford talk—an' take appropriate measures."

His voice was very steady. There was a distant clattering of many hoofs. He raised his hand in signal, and his followers, with Milford and Sally in their midst, headed for the upper end of the draw which had been their place of rendezvous with Lem. It was practically full-dark, now, but the riders moved with confidence.

For a long time their way ran over soft earth and the only sound of their going was the much-muffled mutter of hoofs and the occasional louder jangling of bit or spurs. They did not try for speed. Here was a tangle of interconnecting draws and gulleys; their pursuers, unable to follow them by sound, would have to stop at every junction and then discover by matchlight which of the possible paths their quarry had taken. They would be confused and made uneasy, too, by the fact that they no longer trailed a single horse but a party. That would not be too easy for them to figure out correctly.

The fugitives moved calmly onward until they reached a place that Bob knew well. Then, at a word, the horses swung sharply to the right and entered a narrow, obscure, almost cracklike break in the gulley wall. The way went steeply upward,

and suddenly the sky was all about them.

Stillness. Bob dismounted and went to his horse's head. The others, in silence, duplicated the action. Only Milford, gagged and with his hands bound to his sides, remained in the saddle. Over to the east the moon lifted slowly over the edge of the world and made stark, stretched-out shadows which marked every rise and filled every hollow in the ground. There was no sound anywhere for a long time. Bob waited, his hand on his horse's bridle. He had reached the stage of cold fury and despair which is practically calmness. Grief for his father would come later; now he dared not think. Sally stroked her horse's nose absently. She watched Bob with an uneasy intentness. He had told her reassuring things, but she was not sure how much of what he told her he believed himself. Not to believe him, though, would be to let herself fear much more than merely her father's death. She found herself able to assure herself that she believed Bob. And—of course—she felt a peculiar solicitude for him. It came partly from the lawless measures he had taken, in part on behalf of her father, and in part—well—because he was Bob Sampson and was of an age and appearance to arouse her interest.

THERE CAME the muffled noise of many riders; they rode warily and angrily. Lem Stuart had shot his way through a cordon they'd formed about the Circle Bar. They'd followed him. They'd seen the tracks of other riders, who might be local citizens, or might not. Lem might have joined them or he might not. His pursuers followed without assurance that they would come on him alone, but with the certainty that in this maze of draws and arroyos he could not elude them indefinitely. If they determined which path he took when two paths came together, they could keep on his trail, and with the luridly bright moon now rising they would soon be able to track him as readily as by daylight.

Bob's party of fugitives stood motionless, every man at his horse's head to prevent a whinny or a nicker. The muffled, unrhythmic sound of their pursuers' mounts grew nearer and nearer. It became very near indeed. The trailing men would pass the small side-passage without suspecting its existence, and go on two miles or more before they found they had passed their quarry by. Now, they were at most two hundred yards away. Now one hundred—but as far from the discovery of their intended prey as if they had been as many miles. The jingling of loose accoutrements. The thudding noises of many hoofs on soft earth. The sound, even, of voices.

Then tumult. Milford, bound and gagged and roped in his saddle, expected nothing more or less than the carrying-out of Bob's threat to stake him out in the sun to tell all he knew of the Sheriff's dealing with the two old-timers who'd found the Campeador; he could tell nothing that could lead to their rescue. It had been arranged that after their capture they were to be killed as soon as the location of the fabled but actual lost mine had been wrenched from them. Once the Sheriff had left Buckners, there had been no way on earth for Milford, or anyone else in his name, to find the Sheriff and prevent the murder of the two old-timers. So that Milford's panic had plenty to feed on. At this moment, with men in his own employ within call—but he was gagged—he felt that his last chance of life would vanish with the sound of their passing.

He kicked his horse fiercely. He had no spurs, but he ranked the animal's flank with his heels. The horse reared up, snorting, and suddenly bolted. And Milford, bound as he was, leaned forward in the saddle and used his knees in place of reins to send the animal plunging for the narrow way up which the party of fugitives had come.

LEM STUART'S sixgun flashed in the moonlight. He fired, just as the horse plunged down the de-

cline. His bullet went high. The next instant Milford had vanished down the draw, to the frantic clattering of hoofs.

It was startlingly abrupt. The scrambling of hoofs in the night, the shot, and then the mad dash of a single horse toward the party of the Sheriff's men. The whole thing happened in seconds. The vast moonlit stillness of the hills was broken by startled noises from below. Someone bellowed, "Who's that?"

The hoofs plunged on. Milford clattered out of the side-gulley in starkly terrified flight. His horse raced like a bat out of hell, headed straight for the Sheriff's men. Another bellowed challenge. The moonlight did not yet reach down into the hollows. The trailing party saw only a dim figure seemingly charging upon them, apparently reserving its fire for closer quarters.

A gun roared. Another. There was a scattered crackling of shots. The plunging hoofs faltered. More explosions.

Horse and man went down together; neither moved again. When the Sheriff's men struck matches and saw that they had killed their own boss, their master, and—in a sense—their protector, blasphemy filled the air. One or two essayed to backtrail, up the path down which Milford had ridden. Shots from above drove them back.

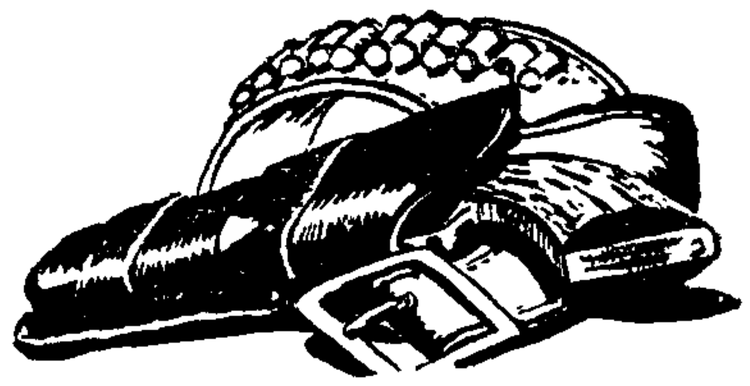
It was the Sheriff himself who saw the only possible chance to save his own skin.

"Roll that hawss off Milford," he commanded. "Two fellas are gonna take 'im to town an' show what's happened. Everybody knows Bob Sampson took him outa town this mornin', an' how. We found 'im dead, understand? Bound and gagged an' pumped fulla holes. The Sampsons joined up with Chub Devers to murder him, see? An' we' goin' to raise a posse with every shootin' man in fifty miles in it. No need for us to try to fight a way up to wheah they are at. We just hold 'em heah. Come mornin' we'll have enough fellas to take 'em without no risk, an' they'll be strung up before anything can happen to make things look bad for us. Nobody'll b'lieve anything they say now, anyways. Come on, now! Get 'im on a horse an' take him back to town an' raise a shootin' posse to hang 'em."

4

THE PROVED death of Milford had many consequences, not one of which was realized at the time by Bob Sampson or any of the men with him. They knew, of course, that the Sheriff would pin the killing of Milford on them; it would appear that Bob had kidnapped Chub's enemy and later murdered him in cold blood, while he was bound and gagged and helpless to defend himself. Which would not make for sympathy for Bob, and even Sally would be looked at askance. To Bob and his followers, the death of Milford at this point appeared the most irreparable of disasters. It outlawed them automatically and made hopeless any idea of getting back on the right side of the law, and certainly ruled out any notion of avenging the deaths of Pop and Chub.

But in Buckners, the arrival of Milford over a led horse's back produced consternation of a different sort. He'd kept a dozen or more hangers-on busy in the town alone. There were lookouts in the gambling house, hired for their toughness and ability with guns. There were bouncers in the dance-hall, ready to handle any complaining customers who claimed to have been robbed by the dance-hall girls. And besides, there were the riders on Milford's four ranches—acquired by ticklish means—who had not been chosen for their records as Sunday-school pupils. Alive and warned, Milford could have assembled an army of not less than forty or fifty very hard customers who would use their guns at his command and in-



dependently of the Sheriff. And there was the Sheriff. Alive, Milford ruled an empire. Dead...

There were suddenly forty or fifty men in Buckners and round about who no longer had a boss. The Sheriff did not count. He was a figurehead; a man who took orders like the rest of them. None of the gunmen or gamblers who had formed a more or less closeknit gang under Milford's leadership were prepared to follow the Sheriff. There was—it was an odd situation—no longer a legal basis for their continued cohesion in crookedness. They had lived under color of lawful occupaton while Milford was alive and paying them; but on the instant of his death each man had to look out for himself. And each man did.

Within an hour after Milford's body had been brought into the little town and put on display in the dance-hall—the Sheriff had commanded it to arouse public indignation—Milford's small empire fell apart. The quicker-witted of his adherents moved quickly. Only a quarter-hour after his death was known in Buckners, a faro-dealer in his gambling-house went quietly out of the establishment, mounted a horse that did not belong to him, and started out of town with the "bank" of his own game in his pocket. He got as far as the edge of the settlement, when another of Milford's men recognized him in the moonlight, instinctively realized that the gambler was leaving because the end of lush days had come, and that he would not leave empty-handed. The faro-dealer fell out of his saddle with a bullet in his heart, and somebody else headed north with twenty-five hundred dollars in banknotes and gold that had been Milford's.

THIRTY MINUTES after the arrival of Milford's body, the looting of the gambling-house was complete. Fifteen minutes later still, the dance-hall closed. Four ominously hard-eyed men—known to everybody—shut it up and began to hunt for cash to take away. One of them was stabbed by a dance-hall girl who—herself already packing—resented his intention to take her savings and tawdry jewelry to finance his travels. The bartenders in Milford's saloon continued to serve drinks—but there was no money in the cash-drawer, and they explained volubly that they had handed it over at gunpoint to two certain men whom they named, but who were actually sunk in drunken slumber out behind. Hangers-on in Buckners, the rabble of a town tuned to the dissipations of a countryside, thronged the saloon to discuss the killing of Milford. Presently there was uproar; the bartenders discreetly dodged out, and because of their absence the crowd helped itself to the stock-in-trade, and then in sheer exuberance began to smash things. Presently they battered on the doors of the closed dance-hall—which did not matter because most of its inmates were already on the way to somewhere else.

Out on Milford's four ranches, some of the hands debated absorbedly the formation of a gang which should take over Milford's interests and activities by force, but most of them were much too wise. Cattle bunched together for marketing were roused from their bed-ground and started off through the darkness by those who had tended them for Milford, but now would sell them for themselves. With haste so much of the essence, there were not enough cattle rounded up for swift rustling by their former guardians; there was shooting on one of the ranches, but on the others the hands who were too late to start off with beef on the hoof in lieu of wages philosophically started off anyhow. It occurred to them that the Sheriff would have his hands full, and wouldn't be too anxious to persecute men who knew too much about him anyhow. So those who philosophical-

ly left Milford's ranches empty-handed paused, philosophically gathered what cattle they could of other brands—any brands—and cheerfully pushed on through the night toward the Border. Which was not accomplished without trouble; guns flashed spitefully in the moonlight here and there. At one place there were lurid flames licking skyward from haystacks, where winter-feed had been fired to draw the hands of a certain ranch to the spot, while departing former employees of Milford gathered up a small fortune in beef. In short, the death of Milford let all hell loose in Buckners, and lawlessness over all the routes by which his henchmen essayed to depart.

In the hills there was relative quiet. The Sheriff knew nothing of the unfortunate results of Milford's return to Buckners in a highly deceased state. He kept the mouth of the draw from which Milford had ridden under siege, and developed grandiose ideas of taking Milford's place. At the very least, he considered, he could hope to acquire the Campeador for himself. With that fabulous but very real bonanza for his own, he could afford—

THE MOON shone down with a white-hot light. At three in the morning Bob Sampson sent off the last of his men. Lem Stuart had been the second of them to leave, taking a reluctant and protesting Sally to safety. There'd been one man to sneak away first, to scout out the possibility of escape for Sally, and he'd ridden with his six-gun out and ready. If muffled hoofs and riding-gear didn't enable him to get away undetected, he'd be able to get off at least one shot. Then the others would try something else. But the silence of the night had been unbroken. Lem and Sally tried it next, with the balance ready to follow and charge, shooting, into any fracas that might develope. Bob and the rest, though, made enough noise to keep the Sheriff's posse interested where they were. Lem and Sally got clear away. Lem had orders to take Sally to the ranch of a man who would surely whisk her clear out of this county, sheriff or no sheriff, law or no law, Milford murdered or Milford not. He'd do that much out of friendship for Chub Devers and Bob Sampson. And after that, Bob had made his other followers slip away one by one, while he stood guard upon the narrow gulley up which they'd ridden to allow the posse to pass by, but which had been turned into a trap.

At three in the morning, Bob was left alone, coldly raging and filled with a corrosive bitterness. His father and Chub Devers had been ambushed by the Sheriff. He'd kidnapped Milford to force a trade—and there'd been no trade. The Sheriff plainly couldn't swap two living old-timers for his boss. So Bob had failed utterly either to rescue or avenge his father, and the men who'd followed him were outlaws now; his accomplices in blatant lawlessness. In common decency he'd had to get them clear. So he'd sent them off with quite senseless orders to gather together at a certain distant place and wait for him to join them. He'd never get there.

Now he lay still in the white moonlight, watching the narrow draw for signs of anyone trying to creep up it. His life was ruined and his self-respect was gone. He could not have any hope of any sort—not even the hope of seeing Sally again. As sensible a finish as any other would be simply to mount his horse and go charging down the gulley into the middle of the Sheriff's posse. His fate would be the same as Milford's—only he might do some damage before he was killed. And if he did, by great good fortune he might kill some of the men who had tortured his father and Chub. As he saw it, he had only the choice between such an ending, or the role of a fugitive for the rest of his life. But the idea of flight, when everything he had done had been forced upon him by the criminality of others, was intolerable. He could accept death at the hands of gunmen, yes; honest men had been killed by

criminals before. But he would not accept the part of a murderer, himself, as a proof of the success of those he'd fought against.

A SOFT warm wind wandered over the hills. There was a giant stillness everywhere. It was so still that the occasional indefinite sounds made by his own hobbled horse were plainly audible, and he thought that he could even hear the sound of the posse's horses, tied to picket-ropes.

He wormed his way back from the post commanding the gulley whose mouth the posse watched. He freed his horse from its hobble. He mounted and rode hurriedly for the top of the incline. Some light shone into its very bottom, now, reflected from a moonlit sidewall. He went briskly down it, his mount picking a way capably among the stones. He reached the end of the way.

He charged out of it, white-hot with rage, both guns out, expecting death and horribly resolved to make it cost the Sheriff and his men as dearly as possible.

All the hills were very quiet and utterly serene. What lawlessness prevailed in the county—and there was enough!—was in isolated spots where individual men, or at most groups of two or four or five, tried to seize on something valuable to take with them in their flight. Most of those small tumults were out on the open range. By this time there was no longer great disturbance in Buckners. Dwindling white smoke curled up from heaps of ashes where a dance-hall had been, and there was damage elsewhere from the senseless violence of a drunken mob, but the town had quieted down. Everywhere, in fact, there was almost absolute peace.

The vicious barking of Bob Sampson's guns, and the fang-like dartings of flame from sixgun muzzles, was a very minute matter in the vastness of the hills. There was a not-too-wide draw with steep-walled sides and tumbled boulders along its length. There was moonlight pouring into it, now, and casting sharp-edged, inky-black shadows. There was a mounted man—Bob—charging out into the bright light, and gun-flashes spitting at him from a dozen spots, and other flashes licking out from his guns. All of which was seen and known and heard in a space of a few hundred yards only—and the hills covered hundreds of square miles.

But it was a very savage and a very desperate battle, while it lasted. One man on horseback against a dozen ensconced behind boulders. Two sixguns against a dozen repeating rifles. One man, feigning an attempt to escape to draw other men out to where he could kill them before he was killed...

He had almost cut through the besiegers, at that, when bullets tore into the body of the horse beneath him. The horse leaped convulsively. Bob was thrown clear. He landed—

And did not move. When men with ready rifles poked him curiously, his body yielded with absolute limpness. They turned him over. His forehead glistened with a dark-red stain.

5

THE SHERIFF came back to the jail as the very beginning of dawn made the town of Buckners into the seeming of a settlement abandoned and sinking to decay. There was a heap of ashes where the dance-hall had been. Three saloons were gutted—not by fire, but by a mob which had formed itself around the fact that Milford's saloon could be looted with impunity. There was other damage, but now the members of the mob slept heavily, to wake presently and marvel at what they had done while drunk. The Sheriff had been put to considerable trouble to find out what had happened; he was startled, dismayed and perhaps a little scared. He was, in a

way, as completely ruined as Bob Sampson.

With Milford dead and his empire shattered, the Sheriff had no backing either of money or of gunmen whom he could deputize and use under color of the law. The men who'd been with him in the hills were the only ones he could command, and he could command them only as long as they did not learn the details the Sheriff had just found out. The lawlessness practised by his closest associates; the plain fact that he was as nearly responsible as anybody for the looters and rustlers who tonight had gone into action; the complete discrediting of his faction by every man in it turned outlaw in one night—these things were ruinous. There was just one chance on earth for him to pull something out of the wreckage of Milford's regime. And, like every other man of Milford's following, he set out to salvage what he could.

He went heavily into the jail and stopped before the cell in which he'd locked Bob Sampson, very inadequately bandaged where he'd landed on his head when his horse dropped dead beneath him. Bob sat up and faced him bitterly.

"All hell's busted loose," said the Sheriff heavily. "You' in a tough spot. Half the town's burned down an' theah's rustlin' all over the county. I got to go out an' chase down some o' those fellas."

Bob said nothing. His jaw was set and his lips twisted in utter, impotent savagery.

"By rights," said the Sheriff, as heavily as before, "I'd oughta leave you locked up right heah in jail. That's my plain duty. After all, I don't sure-'nough *know* that some of Milford's friends figger on lynchin' you. I just heard it."

Bob's hands clenched, but he was silent.

"If I leave you heah," said the Sheriff doggedly, "nobody can say a word. I got to go huntin' rustlers. If you get lynched, nobody can say it's my fault. Theah ain't no reason for me not to leave you right heah while I go off."

Bob's eyes burned, but he said nothing. There was a pause. "Dammit," said the sheriff angrily, " 'You *want* me to leave you heah for Milford's frien's to lynch?"

Bob spat deliberately on the floor of his cell.

"I'll make a bargain with you," said the Sheriff. "I know dam'-well you know wheah you' pa an' Chub Devers foun' the Campeador now. You tell me wheah it is, so's I can stake out somethin' close alongside, an' I'll take you ridin' with me, protectin' you from Milford's friends."

Bob grinned savagely. "If you think that's a joke—" Then he said furiously. "Go to hell!"

THE SHERIFF turned and lumbered away. He closed the outer door of the jail and ostentatiously locked it. There was a creaking of leather. The confused stamping of many hoofs. Other men mounted. Bob, in his cell, heard the Sheriff ride across the street and bellow in stentorian fashion. He bellowed again. There were stirrings. Windows opened. The Sheriff shouted loudly to someone at a window, "Listen heah! Me an' my deputies are goin' off after some rustlers. I left Bob Sampson locked in the jail. You see to 't that he gits somethin' to eat an' don't git out."

A voice answered, apprehensively. Others had heard, undoubtedly. The Sheriff and his men went riding off into the dark. There was as yet only the barest fading of the horizon to the eastward. The moon hung low to the west. The ramshackle buildings of Buckners cast long black shadows. The troop of horsemen, riding out of town, cast attenuated outlines of themselves and their mounts on before them, the sharp shadow-edges hardly softened by powdery dust which rose behind their horses' hoofs.

There was stillness. There was silence. For a space there was only that deep quietude which hangs over a small town during the hour before dawn. But it did seem that—just below the level of sounds that could

certainly be heard—there was uneasy muttering somewhere.

The indefinite grayness to the east, which was so slight that one could hardly be sure of it, grew faintly more visible. After a long while, the grayness was positively there. Soon another day would come. Time passed, and passed, and nothing happened except that the whole eastern quarter of the sky was paler than the rest. Nothing moved anywhere. There was not yet even the first hint of sunrise coloring.

Then came the cushioned thumpings of hoofs. Not in the direction in which the Sheriff had vanished. In the exactly opposite direction. The hoof-beats grew louder, but were still not loud. And then, with the moonlight at their backs, eight men rode quietly up to the jail. In the shadow, it was not at first apparent that they wore their neckerchiefs pulled up over their faces as masks.

There was a single, wooden, splintering crash inside the jail. Then silence there, too.

Four of the eight men dismounted. They knew exactly what they were going to do. They went to the jail door; there was no nonsense of trying it. Guns roared savagely. The jail-door lock was shot away. The four pushed in. One struck a match and lighted a lamp on the Sheriff's desk. Again, no fumbling. They knew every move they needed to make and where everything was. The lamplight showed their masks clearly, now.

There were stirrings in the town. A window went up somewhere. One of the four still-mounted men fired at it. Glass crashed; there were no more stirrings.

INSIDE THE jail, the four men went back to Bob Sampson's cell. Again they had the air of men who knew exactly and precisely what they were about. Ignoring Bob, sitting on a wooden stool and staring at them with eyes like flames, one put his gun-muzzle to the cell-door lock. He pulled trigger. He fired again. He wrenched powerfully at the barred door. It came open.

"Come outa theah!" he rasped.

Masked men. Guns out. An order to come out and be killed. Bob regarded them with the very quintessence of bitterness. These men were the Sheriff's men, returned masked after making sure that they had established their departure to hunt rustlers. The Sheriff was one of this four. They belived, insanely, that his father had somehow conveyed to him the secret of the Campeador. They would carry him away and torture him, too, to extract the secret he did not possess. In any case they would kill him. He had no hope at all—nor any particular desire—to live, under conditions which would make him a fugitive forever for crimes that others had committed. He sat still, his eyes burning, to force them to shoot him where he sat.

"Come outa theah!" rasped the voice again.

He still did not move. A man swore. Two men together, guns in their hands, went into the cell to drag him out. They held their guns upon him. But a man who threatens another with a gun and holds the threatened man absolutely at his mercy, always expects his prospective victim to act exactly as he would. It is suicide to defy a gun at point-blank range, in the hands of a man who has no reason not to use it.

He glared at them, his arms hanging limply to the floor beside the wooden stool on which he sat. He made no movement to obey. So the two men reached out their hands to drag him from his place.

His arms came up. In each hand was half the stool—splintered when he saw masked men through his cell-window. He struck as his arms flashed up. One-half of the stool struck a man's wrist and his sixgun clunked heavily against the ceiling. The other half—its seat was an inch and a half thick—shattered the other man's elbow. The gun dropped as the man screamed, and Bob was down after it before it reached the floor. He came up again, already shooting.

The town of Buckners waked. There was tumult in the jail. There

were shots, and yells, and more shots and yells. The echoes in the stone-walled building multiplied the racket. There were crashings, and more shots...

Then somebody was shooting savagely out of the jail door, and one of four mounted men jerked and fell out of his saddle; three other mounted men who were too-easy targets hastily pumped lead at the doorway even as they dug in their spurs and plunged away.

Then silence fell over the town of Buckners again.

IT REMAINED unbroken, or nearly so, while the sun rose. Then a grim cavalcade appeared in the distance and came steadily toward the town. It came from the direction of the hills. There were very many men in this advancing dust-cloud. It was an army which even Milford's assembled following could have fought, but not defeated. And every man in it was very grim and coldly angry—except a white-faced girl whose expression was too strained and anxious to be considered grim by any standard.

The dust-cloud reached town, and riders entered the principal street. At their head were two elderly figures, one thick-set and silvery-haired with a bandage on one arm, and one with bristling whiskers and an expression of concentrated indignation. Behind them rode young range-riders and middle-aged ranch-owners and more range-riders. And there was no levity on the face of any one of the three-score or four-score riders. They filled the street and approached the jail.

And Bob Sampson stepped out—with the signs of close warfare upon him—and nodded.

"Hello, Pop," he said drily. "Howdy, Chub. I' been right worried about you two, till half an hour ago. Then I found out I'd been frettin' needless."

Chub Devers sputtered, "Dammit! Dammit! We went to wheah you was holdin' off the posse, an' your hawss was dead an' you was gone! We figgered you was either daid, or brung into jail. What in hell—"

Bob tried to roll a cigarette, but his hands were too stiff or he was too weary. He dropped his hands and the tobacco.

"I was brought to jail," he said evenly. "I just got the right o' things just now. The Sheriff set a ambush for the two of you at Milford's orders, an' you shot up his gang an' lit out—you, Pop, prob'ly ridin' double with Chub. I figure your horse threw you."

His father rumbled indignantly, "Nothin' of th' kind! He was lame, an' findin' him would keep th' Sheriff busy tryin' to pick me up on foot, so I turned him loose. Me an' Chub lit out for the hills whilest he hunted us on the range. He was aimin' to catch us an'—uh—extract the location of the Campeador from us. When we slipped through his fingers, he still figgered we was in bad shape, so he scattered his men an' started huntin' us."

"Yeah," said Bob. "So I hear. But we were right worried—"

"Sally told us!" snapped Chub Devers with asperity. "An' you set out to dry-nurse us! Dammit, I reckon your pa an' me are old enough to look after ourselves!"

"It looks like it, suh," acknowledged Bob. He looked at Sally, and somehow, seemed less weary at the sight of her.

"We figgered on his splittin' his posse an' huntin' for us," sputtered Chub, "an' we needed a hawss, so we dry-gulched one of 'em huntin' us, an' got his hawss; we acted right blood-thirsty an' he talked free. So then we started huntin' for some others. Three fellas we caught, Bob, an' they vied with each other tellin' us what they knew, just as soon as we mentioned stakin' 'em out over ant-hills. Yes, suh, they vied with each other! So we rode over to th' Circle Bar, an' we sent the fella you'd left theah to go fetch some friends of ours to listen to what Milford's hands were tellin' us. We had a reg'lar legislature listenin' to details of what Milford an' the Sheriff been pullin' when Lem Stuart found us an' busted in on us with Sally. Then we went lookin'

for you, an' it looked like you was dead or jailed, so we come heah. Huh! Looks like you' been busy!"

THERE WAS a dead man on the ground before the jail, where he'd been shot off his horse. There was a bandanna neckerchief pulled up over his face for a mask. Bob nodded wearily.

"We hadda kinda fuss," he admitted. "The Sheriff thought I'd been with you an' knew all you knew about the Campeador, so when everything else busted up on him, he rode off public to hunt rustlers, an' come back private, masked, to take me off an' make me tell him what I didn't know before he killed me. An'—" Bob shrugged. "We had right much of a ruckus. He's in back theah how, right dead, an' still with a mask on. There's two wounded fellas there, though, who'll tell you all kinds of interestin' things to keep from gettin' killed. One of 'em told me the Sheriff hadn't caught you. That's when I begun to feel better."

Chub Devers lamented shrilly, "He's daid? Dammit, you Bob! Milford's daid, an' now the Sheriff's daid, an' theah's goin' to be a clean-up of this heah county, an' I ain't done a mite toward it! You butted in an' spoiled the whole durned business your pa an' me figgered we was goin' to 'tend to!"

Bob's father grunted, "You saved a lotta shootin', though, son. Milford's fellas have scattered an' to hell-an' gone. We got enough fellas to handle 'em, but if we'd come on 'em bunched an' fightin' theah'd ha' been plenty killed. The way you done it was better. I ain't mad a mite, son. Not mad a mite."

He shook his son's hand—and looked keenly at the signs of battle. He wouldn't ask if Bob was hurt, but he looked a lot relieved after he'd looked Bob over. In fact, he looked like he'd have liked to hug his son. But he didn't.

There was moonlight, and the range of the Circle Bar stretched out before the ranchhouse as a sort of sea of frozen silver. A calf bawled hysterically somewhere, and over in the corral its mother—penned away from it—expressed frenzied maternal solicitude. A voice said from the shadows of the porch, "Chub, y'seen Bob an' Sally?"

Another voice—also deep in the shadows—sputtered, "D a m r i g h t! They' down by the corral, leanin' on the fence!"

The first voice was the voice of Bob Sampson's father. It came again, drily, "Everybody else in fifty miles has come around askin' to see those ore-samples from th' Campeador. They act as wrought up about our findin' the Campeador as the ruckus that started when we come back. But Bob ain't showed a sign o' interest."

"Nor Sally neither!" sputtered Chub Devers indignantly. "Dammit, we go off an' got a couple fortunes to leave 'em, an' we come back, an' they don't give a damn! All they' workin' on is arguments why they'd oughta git married right away. What' you goin' to do with a pair o' dumbfools like that?"

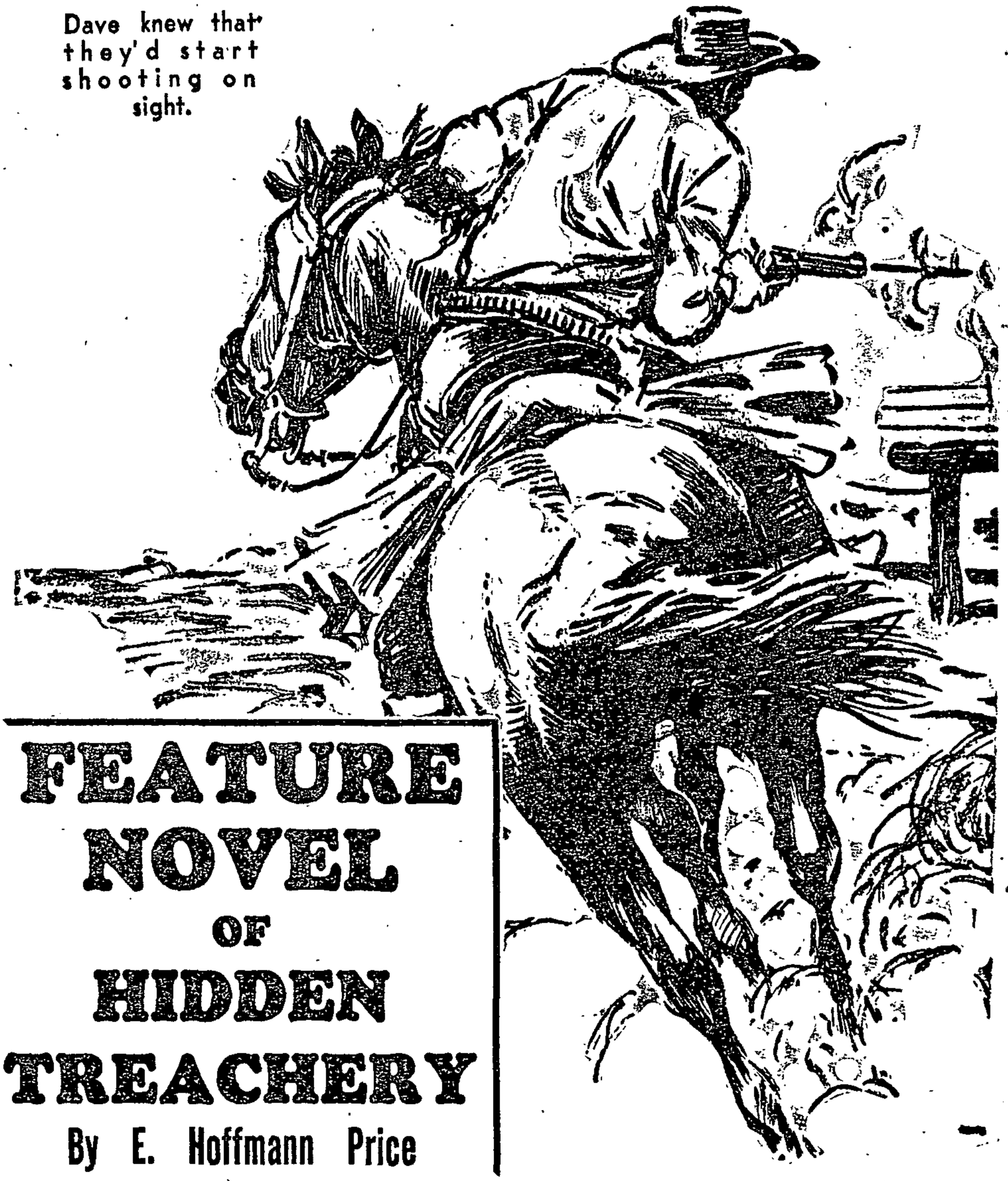
Bob's father chuckled. "Me, I'm goin' to let 'em get married. How about you?"

"Dammit," said Chub, "d'you think I'm crazy, tryin' to stop 'em?" Then he grunted. "Come to think of it, I was that same kinda dam-fool twenty-thirty years ago. So was you. I reckon we can stop worryin' about 'em."

Bob's father s t o o d up and stretched. He yawned prodigiously. "Yep, we was the same kinda dam-fools, an' thank Gawd for it. Come along, Chub, I'm turnin' in."

There were footsteps on the porch in the deep shadow. There was the sound of a screen-door opened and closing. And then the world was left to moonlight and the pair down leaning on the corral fence.

LAWMAN, KEEP OUT!



FEATURE NOVEL OF HIDDEN TREACHERY

By E. Hoffmann Price

It was bad enough when the Chapmans busted out of jail, just before election time, with old Hamlin's deputy running against him. But, even worse, was when young Dave Hamlin found that his fiance, Jane Sanford, was kin to the Chapmans, and had aided the fugitives. So, Dave figured, the only way to square things was to bring those Chapmans back himself—before the election!

"I CAN WIPE my own nose and make my own plans!" Dave Hamlin had told his father, by way of settling a wrathful argument about Jane Sanford. And that night, as he sat with Jane in an alcove of the *Eldorado Tavern*, Dave got down to the after-dinner business of talking her into wearing the diamond ring which twinkled in its velvet-lined box.

Jane was a small, shapely woman; Dave called her vest-pocket size. She carried herself well, with an easy straightness, and a confident set of the shoulders. Although she had Dave plumb fascinated by her trick of flicking her long lashes, and going wide-eyed—and at the same time, bringing a pair of dimples into play—there was an offsetting expression of levelness and directness. She'd do to take along; the more old man Hamlin insisted that beauty was only skin deep, the more Dave figured that such being the case, there was

no sense in holding her looks against her.

"Not with this election riling your father," Jane protested, when he caught her hand and tried to slip the ring on her finger. "That would be too roughshod! First Joash Webb resigns as chief deputy, to run against him for sheriff, and now *you* want to defy him."

Dave pretended her objection made no sense. "What do you mean by saying that we'd be *defying* him?"

"Don't play innocent, and don't try to fool me!" she retorted. "If you were a dressmaker and heard the biddies chattering while one of them gets a fitting, you'd know." With a mocking little grimace, she mimicked her patrons: "*The Hamlins and the Daleys and the Crawfords have been good neighbors ever since there were white men in this county.* They were quoting your father, darling, after they'd heard him air his opinions. And here's some more: *If us old timers don't stick together, and if our kids don't carry on, we'll be crowded out by thieves, sodbusters, sheepherders, and every other kind of varmint that pot-headed congressmen cater to, to get votes.* Do I have it letter perfect, or don't I?"

"That's only his regular grumbling," Dave objected. "He's been at it for years; if it weren't for him, the county'd gone to the dogs, ages ago. It hasn't a thing to do with you and me."

"Oh, no? The Daleys and the Crawfords both have good-looking daughters he figures you ought to pick from. No, your dad really hasn't anything against me; he merely doesn't know anything in favor of me; and he isn't interested in learning." She pointed. "Look what's been staring at me all through supper."

"I've been too busy looking at you," Dave said; for the first time he noticed the election poster. As always, he spent a moment wondering if time would ever make him look like his father.

Asa Hamlin For Sheriff: the words, the stern square face with the wolf trap mouth, and the eyes which seemed to be looking from behind levelled guns, made Dave's broad shoulders droop as from weight and weariness. He was fed up with being prepared, year after year, for the chore of being as important as Asa Hamlin.

With that face staring from the wall, there could be no persuading Jane. He put the ring back into its box, snapped the lid shut, and closed her fingers about it. "It can't ever be for anyone else; take it home and get acquainted with it."

Whatever she might have answered was cut short by a shot, and by a volley in return. The sounds came from the plaza, on which the jail faced. Men shouted; Winchesters whacked as several horses raced away over the iron hard ground beyond the square.

The proprietor came running into the dining room. "The Chapmans have busted out of jail!" he yelled. "Hell's a-boiling, Dave!"

SAM AND Ben Chapman had finally been rounded up by Asa Hamlin. Dancing their jig at the end of a rope was to have been their contribution toward re-electing the sheriff; their escape at this of all times was bad business.

Dave ran out to the square, where men with lanterns milled about. Asa Hamlin was already on the scene. He loomed up, and became a rallying point. Then the wounded jailer lurched into view. "They didn't bust out!" he cried, wiping blood from his face. "I caught a jigger trying to heave guns betwixt the bars. He had a couple spare hosses. I drilled him onct, afore he rid away."

A big man with a ruddy face and an onion-shaped nose came stalking along. He stopped short, folded his arms, and wagged his head. "Asa," he said to the Sheriff, "no matter if I did turn in my star for political reasons, I'll be mighty willing to give you a hand; only it'd look like I aimed to deprive you of your chance to make good for not keeping a suitable guard on the hoosegow."

Hamlin turned on Joash Webb, whose posters plastered every bit of

space not occupied by the incumbent's advertising. *I'd rather leave you here, glorying over a false alarm, than riding along boogering things up.* Then, eyeing his son, "If you're not afraid of ruining those store clothes, mount up and we'll find out who tried to slip guns into the jug."

They had not ridden for more than an hour when one of the posse came hooting back to join the main party. He led a horse, cool enough now, but all caked with dried sweat. The animal had a bullet graze so light that the skin had not been broken; dried blood marked the saddle skirt and tapadero on the near side. The critter belonged to the Rafter LK, only a mile or so off. Once shed of his rider, he had made for home. No telling where the man had gone, while the posse chased the LK animal.

Dave rode back with his father, and those of the posse who were not staying at the Rafter LK to begin cutting sign at dawn.

When the pursuers returned to Palo Pinto, Hamlin's supporters hustled him to the back room of the Antler Bar to tell him how Joash Webb had been making the most of the false alarm jail break. Some of the hotheads were all for going to Webb's headquarters, the *Miners & Traders*, to make him retract the yarns which his henchmen were spreading.

Hamlin had an answer: "You fellows keep your shirts on! There'd be shooting, sure as you're a foot high; that'd do nothing but give us a black eye."

"But he can't get away with saying there'd been no fracas if you'd had your mind on business instead of on electioneering."

"Ten to one," the sheriff declared, "it was one of Webb's boys trying to make us look like fools. And if we squeal like stuck pigs, we sound as well as look like fools!"

When the meeting broke up, Dave's father gave him a sour look and grumbled about his lolling around in store clothes, lallygagging when a campaign was going on.

"Hell, no," the sheriff snapped in reply to his son's retort, "nothing wrong for a fellow that's going to practice law to dress well. It's all right too, if you want to play around with that gal, but advertising her in public thattaway, right under the noses of old timers with good looking daughters, people I'm depending on—hey, where you going? You stand fast and hear me out!"

"I'm going to make my apologies for breaking away from dinner. There's nothing to hear out; I've heard it every day since I came back from the east!"

A FEW MINUTES later, Dave had ridden to Jane Sanford's gate. Though the house was dark, he was not going to dally any longer. He knocked at the door and announced, "Honey, I have something to tell you."

"Oh, Dave, it's frightfully late! Won't it keep till tomorrow?"

Dave, on edge from the old man's ill temper, retorted, "No, it won't. I've just been riding all over hell's half acre, listening to dad yapping at me; I have some things on my mind."

"Oh." Then, after a dragging silence, "Well, just a minute, till I put something on."

After a good deal more time than it should have taken to find her blue robe, and felt slippers trimmed with eiderdown, Jane let him in. "You look grim enough for an election poster!" But in spite of the smile and affectionate whimsy, it was plain that she was all on edge, and had not been asleep at all. "He's out of sorts because you didn't catch the trouble-maker? I've been worried all evening."

Once in their favorite corner of the sofa, he said, "He's worse than ever. Get your things packed up; we are leaving here and now to get married."

"No, Dave, we can't! I won't! Look what it'd do to all the plans your father made for you while you were at school."

"I'll practice in Tucson. Don't need him to grubstake me."

"But it is always tough, starting that way. You'd end by feeling that I was the cause of the hard going, and you'd be right. Dave, I can't keep your ring."

She bounced to her feet. In another moment, she would be returning his ring. He had to stop her before she made any such move. Once the act was complete, it would make her determination all the more solid. He bounded after Jane, and caught her before she could reach the bureau, in her bedroom. He had won by a yard.

"Giving it back to me is bad medicine. Keep it and think on it," he urged.

She cried out in dismay at his touch. She trembled violently as though in sudden terror. And then Dave saw the tea-kettle in the corner, and the blood soaked shirt. The water in the basin was red; there were strips torn from a sheet. He caught the odor of horses and of tobacco.

"You had a lot of straightening up to do before you let me in!"

The door of the clothes closet slammed open before Jane could answer. A grimy man with one arm in a sling came out with pistol levelled. "This isn't so bad," he said to Jane. "Keeping me hid till I could get a hoss would've been mighty hard. You, there! Shuck your gun and step away from it."

Dave dropped his gun belt and retreated. The outlaw snatched the weapon and backed from the room. A moment later, he was galloping hell-bent.

2

JANE CLUNG to Dave. She cried. "No, don't give the alarm! Whoever that fellow is, what does *he* amount to?"

"You mean you don't know him?"

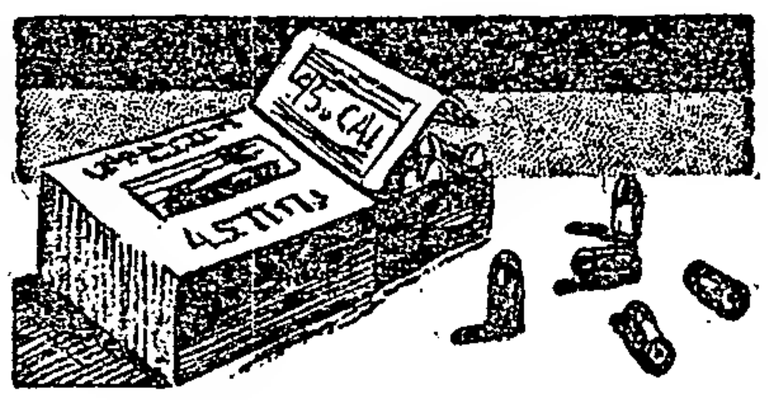
"I've seen him around Mesa Grande, before I left. The name is Blaine, Tom Blaine, one of the Chapmans' friends. Giving the alarm would put you and me in an awful fix. Whatever you said, it'd be twisted by Joash Webb to go against your father."

Dave sighed wearily, and sat down. "All he is wanted for is attempted jail delivery. You say you are from Mesa Grande?"

"That's why I can't marry you," Jane answered. "Sam and Ben Chapman are kinfolk of mine. I left there because I couldn't stand living where I wasn't ever sure whether a cousin or an uncle was an outlaw or part-time rustler; and the honest ones were always being imposed upon by the crooked ones."

That took all the starch out of Dave; but he did not quit easily. "Never heard of any Sanfords on the dodge."

"But if I married you, people would soon enough find out, and take notice of who I am; you father's political enemies would see to that."



"I told you, we'll leave Palo Pinto. Like I intended to when I came to see you tonight."

The argument went in circles. Neither had anything new to say, but neither would give in on that account. The discussion would have continued until daybreak, had it not been for the fire alarm.

Suspended from a frame in the plaza was a length of steel rail, and a sledge. Whoever had discovered the blaze was hewing and whanging away to raise the dead. Now bells clanged as the volunteer fire company turned out with hand drawn equipment. Judging from the cheers, half the town was following, either to watch, or to form a bucket brigade.

"Coming this way," Dave remarked, and uneasily asked himself how he could explain the loss of both

horse and gun. "Say—I smell smoke!"

He had scarcely spoken when from the rear came a sudden draught, as though the back door had opened. Smoke, stifling and blinding, billowed through the house. A gust of hot air and a shower of sparks prodded Dave to impulsive action. He feared that Jane, already on the verge of panic, might take a crazy notion to go dashing about to save a few belongings before the house went up like tinder. He scooped her up in his arms. Half blinded, he plunged through surging smoke, and out to the porch.

The yard swarmed with firemen and spectators. Joash Webb was there, hugely enjoying the show. He boomed, "Stand back! The lady's all OK. Hair ain't afire, gown ain't afire, she's jest choking a mite, and she's in good hands."

Dave set Jane on her feet. He blinked the tears out of eyes smarting from smoke. Webb sounded off, "Dave, you two musta been mighty busy, not waking up till the blaze just about up and scorched your pin feathers."

The words had the form of salty good humor; it was Webb's tone and the sly glance he cocked at his campaign committee that made it nasty. Their laughter prodded Dave to fury.

He tied into Webb, giving him a punch in the gizzard and then a crisp one on the jaw. "Keep your mouth cinched up, you red-nosed son!" he shouted, as Webb staggered back, and but for his committee would have dropped in a heap.

Webb's henchmen closed in on Dave. Caught up by the rush, and badly outnumbered, he was getting a first class mauling when his father and several deputies arrived.

"What's all this?" the old man demanded, when order was restored. Then, hearing Dave's side of it, he said, "Don't get so riled about a little joshing, you're making a monkey of yourself. It sure is odd, not noticing the blaze until you got smoked out."

The blaze, meanwhile, had been put out. Firemen trooped through the house, looking for curtains which might have been set smouldering by flying sparks. They said that there had been nothing but a big heap of straw and newspapers flaring up near the kitchen steps, and that the swinging open of the back door was what had sucked the flame into the house.

"Straw and paper!" Dave shouted. "A put-up job. An alarm turned in before there was a fire. You call that a bit of joshing, running the risk of setting a house ablaze, when everything's been dry as a powder horn for months?"

One of the firemen came running out of the house with the fugitive's shirt. "Hey, look-ee here! Someone's been shot up. Bandages and stuff in the bedroom."

"Bet that's the fellow who tried to turn the Chapmans loose," a Webb man cried. "What's been going on here, anyway?"

Then a man rode up yelling, "Asa, the Chapman's have busted out for sure, this time! The dang fire alarm pulled every deputy off the job to see what was happening; that went and done it!"

THE ESCAPE would not have been noticed until morning had not the jailer got shed of the gag and bonds which the convicts had fixed carelessly in their haste.

Joash Webb shouted, "Sheriff, you better throw that son of yours into the hoosegow, and his gal with him! Afore they help the Chapmans some more."

"That's gospel," someone called, from the crowd. "She's kin to the Chapmans."

Jane, who had made the most of her chance to slip into a house dress, came out. Her color had receded; it was only with an effort that she kept her mouth tight. But she held her head high, and looked a good deal taller than she actually was.

"Yes, the Chapmans are distant cousins of mine," she acknowledged with unshaken voice. "I left Mesa Grande to get away from outlaw

country, and to make a fresh start. I had nothing to do with any of tonight's trouble. The man who caused the disturbance around supper time caught me here, alone, a few hours later. He made me bandage his wound; he told me if he were caught here, it'd look bad for me."

"What was Dave doing here, this late?" someone challenged. "What kind of woman are you, anyway? It ain't fitting."

Dave answered, "Jane and I are engaged. Show them your ring." And when she displayed the diamond, he went on, "Jane need not have let me in when I came back from riding with dad's posse. But she did let me in, hoping to trap the man who had caused the disturbance. He got the drop on me, and took my horse. That set me back on my heels. I didn't dare report what had happened, because I knew how you people would take it—exactly the way you have done!

"She and I were so worried we didn't notice the fake fire until it was roaring. Is it our fault that the guards posted at the jail left to follow the fire company?"

There was a mutter of assent to this. After all, people did believe in the Hamlins; this was the first time in twenty years that any one had opposed the old man in running for office. And the sheriff, unwilling to accept any favor without meeting it more than half way, had to show his loyal followers that their belief in his integrity was justified. "Dave," he said, "you have sure boogered things up. You and that woman of yours better get the hell out of this town afore the sight of you offends more people than you've already rubbed the wrong way."

So saying, he turned his back and made for the gate.

The crowd followed; in a few minutes, Dave and Jane were alone again in the smoky cottage. There he said, "Lot more politics behind this than anyone can ever prove. Can't say as I blame the old man too much. You stay here and sit tight while I ride out for a manhunt of my own; that's the one way I can wipe out all the dirt that has been done us."

"Do you have to?" she asked anxiously.

"Honey, I have to. No matter where you and I go, the story would follow us, and how far would I get, practicing law? Probably couldn't even get admitted to the bar, in the first place!"

"You're really going out to prove my innocence," she cried. "It's not worth it, not worth the risk."

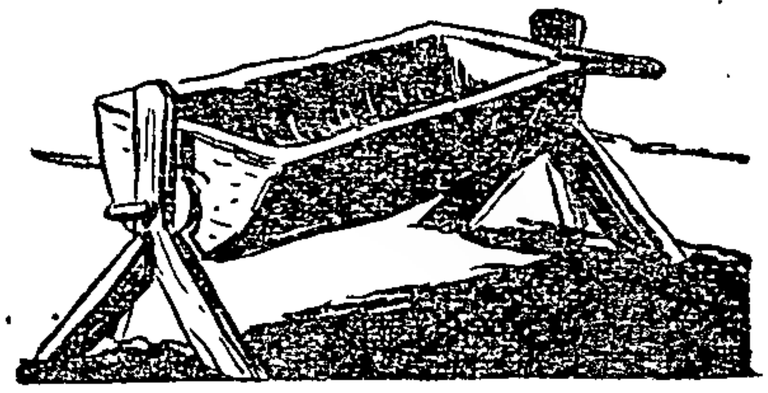
"You hush up," he said, catching her with both arms and kissing her. "One man, on his own, can move faster than any posse, and he can stay on the trail long after a posse has to come home."

THE LIVERY stable keeper gave him one of the several Hamlin mounts boarded there, as well as a Winchester and a Colt, and some odds and ends of grub. Next, Dave stepped into a bar and cashed a check for the full amount of his bank account. These details attended to, he got a room at the hotel. A few hours rest would get him in better shape for the trail. Also, he wanted time to review his memories of the country which the Chapmans would be crossing to get over the territorial line, and beyond the jurisdiction of the Verde County sheriff.

Pausing to think it through, he told himself as he stretched out on his bunk, would save time later. Since he could not investigate every avenue of escape, as could a posse, he had to pick the most logical of the fugitives' trails. Otherwise, he would be beaten before he started. And he had one other point to consider: that, determined to stay on the trail until he cornered his men, he could play it in the manner of the hunters of wild horses, who instead of trying to outrace their quarry, simply "walked" them down. Where a rider could never outdistance an animal running without a burden, a man going afoot, dogging the wild creatures day after day, finally prevailed—because a man had more endurance, in the long pull, than did any horse.

And while Dave would ride, he intended to use the principle of walking his quarry down.

The intensity of his thinking got him so highly keyed up that he soon realized that rest was out of the question. Accordingly, he resolved to ride at once. One thing he still needed: the spy-glasses he had left at Jane's house, the Sunday they had



gone buggy riding. So, on his way out of Palo Pinto, he stopped at her door.

After some moments of knocking and getting no answer, he twisted the knob; once inside, the echo of his voice mocked him. With shaky hand, he touched light to the lamp. Jane, he quickly learned, had gone. The top of her bureau had been swept clean. The clothes closet was empty. He did find the binoculars, but no note to explain the departure.

"Might have known her tribe wouldn't want lawyers or a lawman's son in the family," he said, bitterly, as he turned his back on Palo Pinto.

SUNRISE found Dave approaching one of the three gateways into the mountains. Sign indicated that his hunch had been good. Two men, riding freshly-shod horses, had made hell bent for the Mesa Grande country only a few hours ahead of him. Could be the Chapmans; could be two of the posse; could be any two men at all. But Dave, being in a position to gamble, could carry the pursuit wherever it went; territorial borders meant nothing to him, in which respect he had the advantage over a posse.

Toward noon, he came to a waterhole. He circled about it on foot. On a rock which commanded the backtrail, he found the butts of two Durham cigarettes. There were several matches which had been struck without lighting; their heads had smeared, indicating that they had been sweat-soaked. Spilled tobacco, and a torn wheat straw paper, told him of a tired man, worried, fumbling, and shaky.

He gnawed a bit of jerked beef as he continued sizing up the sign about the water hole: "Both horses grain fed, and shod at the same time, by the same smith. Must've been done in Palo Pinto. Shoes'd be worn more if the job had been done in any of the towns further west."

Dave looked back again. This time he spotted riders, though so far off that his glasses did not help identify them. They were, however, not driving cattle. Must be some of the old man's crowd; in all likelihood, they had cut a trail. From here on, however, there would be more trail-cutting. One could only follow, for the rocky bulwarks allowed no short-cuts. There was no possibility of gaining a lead by quitting the trail, and picking it up later, after having won enough ground to head the fugitives off. Here it was an obstacle race.

Dave was not silly enough to make a race of it. All he could accomplish that way would be to kill his horse. And the old man, however fuming and raging, never forgot that it took more than speed to round up the fugitives. If speed were all that counted, the pursued would nearly always win, having a head start.

However, the growing conviction that he was on the right track, and the urge to strike before the old man could take a hand, made Dave forget his headwork. Long purple shadows reached across the abandoned stage road he was following. Quite a piece ahead was a green spot from which a covey of quail rose with drumming wings. Dog-tired, he pressed on toward the welcome of water.

He was skirting a craggy buttress when his horse whinnied. The warning came too late. A swarthy man had him covered with a Winchester; well back in a cleft in the wall were two fagged-out horses, a bay, and a blue roan.

"Give your saddle a rest," the man

with the carbine commanded; and his partner, popping up from behind some boulders, had a drawn Colt to second his piece of advice: "Get down, and don't grab for hardware, stranger!"

The two were rangy and sharp-featured. They had big noses and narrow faces, and narrower eyes. These were the Chapman brothers; Dave had seen the old man bring them to town. Ben, with the Winchester; Sam, with the Colt. They now had all the aces except this one: that while Dave recognized them, they did not know who he was, or why he was riding. That they had not shot him from the saddle indicated that they were sure he was not the first man of a posse; and this suggested the slim chance which Dave prepared to play up to the limit.

"Hey, what the hell's this?" he stuttered. "What—uh—"

Instead of dismounting, he raised his hands, and glanced from one to the other, blinking and licking his lips and looking stupid.

"Get off that horse," Ben ordered; "we need it. One of ourn's lame, and we're in a hurry."

STIFFLY, Dave dismounted. Being set afoot, or at the best, left with a useless horse, was the final touch. He would probably be tracked down and cornered by one of his father's posses. At the moment, that possibility seemed worse than getting himself shot up. He swayed on his feet, and stumbled as though done in by exhaustion. His lurch carried him out of the immediate line of fire. Though the guns remained levelled, the fugitives had lost the edge of their alertness; they, too, were well past their peak. Their race had been more desperate than his. This helped Dave when, coming up against a rock nearly shoulder high, he clung to it for a moment as though any support were welcome.

Abruptly, he gestured back trail. He made a despairing, croaking sound as of trying to voice one more appeal against being set afoot. The Chapmans, themselves on edge, let their glances shift.

Dave went for his Colt. It came out smoking, but the shot was wild. So was the answering blast; it smashed against the rock behind which he ducked, just as the Winchester's bullet grazed his arm. Dave's horse bolted into the line of fire and stopped a slug. The beast dropped, kicking. Having done themselves out of the spare mount they wanted, the Chapmans scrambled for cover. The canyon echoed with the crash of six-guns and the whiplash whack of the .30-30. Dave dusted Sam, but did not knock him down. Ben's flying lead kicked a spattering of rocky fragments which for a moment blinded Dave. Had the two known this, they could have taken him without risk. Instead, they wormed about to get into better positions.

It was a crazy situation. The horse they wanted was finished. There was a posse overhauling them, and yet they dared not mount up before they settled the hostile stranger who lurked, ready to pay them off. They were taking no more chances. He heard them moving about, getting ready to whipsaw him, so that whichever way he went to avoid the fire of one, he would be in line with the other's gun. Meanwhile, he made the most of his short respite by blinking his eyes clear, and jacking out the empties.

"Just one," he muttered, as he shoved in fresh cartridges. "Lord, give me a crack at just one, and it will be a good pay-day for me!"

The plea came closer to being a prayer than had anything he had uttered since the death of his mother, a dozen years ago. Drilling just one, before he was smoked out, would redeem him.

He held his breath, weighed his chances, and listened for that one sound which would be his cue to come out shooting. For one split second, if he picked it right he would have the edge, however he exposed himself.

A man cursed fiercely. Sam Chapman, trying to climb up the steep slope so as to shoot down into Dave's

sheltering angle, had lost his footing. Dave came out, and he came smoking.

The two horses stampeded out of the cleft. A shot blazed from Ben's quarter of the fracas. Dave pitched forward and landed in a heap among the rocks. He lay there without even kicking.

WHEN HE regained his wits, it was dark. His Stetson had served him well; it had cushioned the impact of a glancing slug, so that he came out of the scrape with nothing worse than an egg-sized lump on his head. Bit by bit, as he groped for deadwood to make a fire, he pieced things together. With one horse lame, the Chapmans had done a lot of looking back, and had thus spotted him as well as the far-off posse. Nearly as Dave could figure things out, they had stuck him up instead of shooting him from the saddle simply because of the chance that he might have been one of the Mesa Grande outlaws, hightailing it home. Finally, they had considered the possibility of his being one of the law-abiding residents of the region: and beyond a certain point, the outlaws dared not antagonize the neighbors who tolerated and harbored them.

At dawn, Dave set out. The first thing he learned was that the Chapmans were afoot; apparently they had been unable to round up their stampeded horses.

"Afraid the posse might spot them," Dave reasoned. "But if those Palo Pinto horses scented the posse's animals, they'd make for them, and join them. Which would lead the old man to believe that the Chapman's had been met by friends with fresh critters. So Dad's outfit wouldn't, according to his view of it, have a Chinaman's chance, riding worn-out horses."

When the old stage road at last snaked out of the mountains and down to the mesa, Dave came to pleasant country which deserved better than to be a hideout for men on the dodge. Two men with high-heeled boots as badly run down as his own were easy to follow. Like himself, the Chapmans were dragging their feet. Finally, someone had given them a lift. Fresh wagon tracks and the abrupt ending of foot prints made that plain. A sodbuster or rancher had taken them to, or at least, toward, Mesa Grande.

On the way, Dave paused to hide his Winchester and saddle-bags in the hollow trunk of a tree killed by lightning. He noted the distant smokestack and the ore chute of the mine whose petering out had crippled Mesa Grande. The railroad, going through a good many miles to the north, had taken from the town what importance it had had in the days when the stage route passed through. What survived would be small, but crusty and self sufficient: just the place for people who did not want outsiders meddling and snooping.

Dave took his time, so as to get to town around dusk; that would keep his arrival afoot from being so conspicuous. He felt lucky and confident because of the freakish outcome of his encounter with the Chapmans. But for the stampeding of the two horses, which must have misled the old man, he might have overhauled the fugitives, handicapped as they had been. Now Dave considered them his meat. Nothing to do but put them on the hook! But he wasn't fooling himself very much; getting into the country, alone, and locating his men, would be a heap easier than getting out with them.

3

WHEN Dave paused to look at the display stuck to the inside of the windows of Howard's General store, he saw why outside lawmen did not get far in Mesa Grande. There were pictures, news-clippings, election posters, and written descriptions to make it easy to pick at sight a sheriff, Association detec-

tive, Pinkerton operator, or United States deputy marshal. Judging from the thoroughness of the display, every county on either side of the territorial line was represented. All they needed to complete the warning was a card reading, *Lawman, Move On!*

In the lot was Asa Hamlin's conspicuous poster. Dave, however, did not wear a moustache, and it would take years for his features to solidify into the craggy outlines of the old man's face. Nevertheless, there was at least a slender change of recognition.

Dave had scarcely sized up the layout when a man behind him asked, "See anyone you know?"

There had been no warning of the speaker's approach. Turning slowly, Dave faced a lean tall man with a beaked nose and pointed white beard. Instead of boots, the man wore moccasins. A sawed-off Parker, cuddled cozily in the crook of the arm, needed but a flick to bring it into line. No one in his right mind would risk a toe-to-toe shoot-out with that hombre.

"Passing through?" he continued. "Or aiming to stay?"

Dave answered, blandly, "Haven't decided on anything except a square meal; heard they didn't have much law around here."

"Got practically none. I'm Long Smith, and I just sort of look out for things."

After estimating the man's height at six feet four or five, Dave said, "Well, I am Medium Smith, and I just sort of look out for myself."

Long Smith considered this gravely. "Easiest way is keep your nose clean. Don't care what you done before you came here; don't care what you are fixing to do your next stop. But don't do nothing whilst you are here."

He nodded and went on, with stately pace and silent feet.

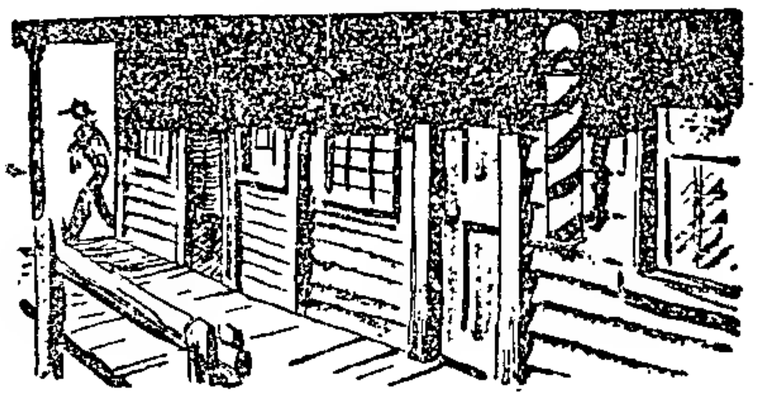
Having met the spirit of Mesa Grande, Dave went to the barber shop, and while getting cleaned up, he had his run-over boot heels fixed by the cobbler next door. He ended by making a deal with Walt Harris, the livery-stable man. In return for the privilege of bunking in the granary, Dave was to help with the chores, morning and evening.

"It's a right sensible system we got here, Medium," Walt explained, when Dave wanted to know how come Long Smith jumped a stranger at first sight. "A man can set here, resting up, or having bullets picked outen his carcass, or he can have a high-heeled old time seeing the elephant. When he gets all honed up for cussedness, he's got all the rest of the territory to whoop it up in; he'd be a pure strain fool for not minding the rules.

"And supposing we helped lawmen? They'd get the glory, and we'd get hell. The owl-hooters'd burn down our haystacks for spite, and drygulch us for fun. Our way of no law a-tall is a dang sight better than the once-in-a-while law that keeps so many outlying and lonesome places all in a lather."

THAT NIGHT, after his stint with pitchfork and manure fork Dave made the rounds of the honky-tonks. He played a bit of keno, he gargled a bit of liquor, and he sized up the girls. At the *Silver Palace* he found one who looked as if she would be helpful to his plan for "walking down" the Chapmans.

She filled her low-cut gown, though not to the running-over



point. From shapely ankles to bare shoulders, she was built just right, and she wore no more than a smidgeon of makeup. Her dark hair emphasized the whiteness of arms and shoulders and smooth throat. Dave liked her face. The features were clean of line; the mouth was good, being neither loose nor yet bitter hard. But what counted was the eyes: they told him she was worried, anxious, and all on edge.

One percentage girl would know more about what went on behind the scenes of Mesa Grande than any dozen citizens; and this one's expression suggested that a combination of courtesy and extravagance would pay off.

By the time the waiter brought the first round of drinks to her table, Dave had learned that her name was Norma, and that she neither danced nor drew a crowd because of the well known jealousy of her steady admirer, Homer Crane.

"You mean he's always cantankerous?"

"Oh, no—just when he's been losing at cards, or maybe drinking a bit too much. And there's been a big game going on two nights now."

If Homer Crane had Mesa Verde buffaloed, he must be passably important, Dave reasoned; in such case, his lady friend would be well posted. Playing up to her would be worth the risk.

"Homer somewhat of a gun-fighter? Shucks, I heard this is a peaceful sort of town." He hailed the waiter, who was at the moment hustling past. "Hey, pardner! Never mind that champagne." He tossed the man a dollar. "Don't reckon I'll set here long enough to gargle it."

As a matter of fact, Dave had not consulted him about wine, but the fellow knew from the wink and the coin that something was being built up. He wheeled toward the table and said, "Unless you're in a powerful hurry, you better have some. It sure is nice, the way we keep it in an ice house; pops like hell and hardly none of it sloshes to the ceiling."

"Don't you worry about Homer!" Norma cut in. "Go ahead and bring the wine!" Then, as the waiter left, she continued, "It's this way, Medium. Being sociable with boys passing through is all right; it's the fellows living here that make Homer hostile."

When the champagne arrived, Dave proposed, "To the first honest-to-Gawd beautiful woman in a coon's age!" And when she had drunk to that, he continued, ruefully, "But if I stay more'n so long, I got to pretend I never saw you and don't ever want to see you."

She warmed up some more, and squeezed his hand. "It's not quite that bad, Medium. Though right now, he's on a gambling streak."

Courtesy, champagne, and his not having at once set to work pawing her had made Norma regard him with more than professional amiability. Seeing this, he said, pointedly, "Afore I make my mind about when to haul out, or if to, supposing you and me have a private talk about this man's town. Homer ever get teetotally paralyzed drunk for three-four days, so he'd not see a thing?"

"Well...not very often."

"I'm the most patient cuss in seven states. Now, if I could see my way around to staying here, I'd sure admire to." He glanced about with uneasiness not entirely feigned. "But this ain't the best place for talking; where you live?"

"Right here at the *Silver Palace*. Second floor, at the front, number twelve. Come up when things slow down."

"You have some wine sent up," Dave suggested. "A passel of it. It'd sort of make talk if I ordered it. Four-five bottles."

"Oh, that'll be fun! I'll quit early, I'll say I have a headache—you better travel now; here comes Homer. He's left the game to change his luck and check up on me."

AS DAVE made tracks, he watched, from the corner of his eye, the solid, squarish man in store clothes who made a bee line toward Norma's corner. Homer would hardly have looked natural without his frown; it seemed as much a part of him as did his way of walking as though he owned a fair-sized piece of everything in sight.

Pondering on Norma's possibilities, both for good and for the opposite, Dave stepped into the *Lone Star*, because there was no music. This was a place where a man could talk without raising his voice; where he could

sit and think. But the way it turned out, Dave found the *Lone Star* no good at all for meditation.

Two cowpunchers were shaking dice at the razzledazzle layout. A third, elbow cocked on the mahogany, watched them and the bartender. When this man looked up, Dave was face to face with Ben Chapman, big as life and twice as nasty. Recognition was mutual and instant. Chapman, while he had not even moved his foot from the rail, or even shifted his weight, was ready for anything.

The dice quit rattling. The "professor" sidestepped a little. Dave came easily toward his man. "You and your partner sure bollixed it up, that time," he said, grinning wryly.

Chapman studied him for a moment. "Worst shooting I ever saw," he admitted; "how'd you get away from the posse?"

"Way I reckon it, and judging from sign, when your horses went a-hammering back trail, the posse figured you'd been met with fresh critters, and no use them trying any further with fagged-out ones." Dave chuckled. "Funny as all get out! If you'd ridden my nag away instead of shooting him, you'd've been meat for the posse. They were too close on my heels for fun, and I'd've been a goner, too."

Chapman's brow unpuckered. "Looks like we done each other a favor."

"Sure we did. But you fellows weren't exactly aiming to do me one, and you owe me a horse. And a saddle."

"You got an argument there! Drink up."

Dave shook his head. "Two of you ganged up on me; I'll talk to the both of you, you and him."

"Don't take him and me to palaver. I'm plenty for you."

Dave grinned. "Not to be unsociable about it, but I was plenty for the two of you. You're missing the point, though; it's a matter of principle. Both of you ganged up on me, and I am waiting on seeing the both of you together. For fun, for a hoss, or for whatever the hell you may crave."

He turned and walked out before things went too far. If he shot it out with Ben Chapman, he would euchre himself out of his chance of locating Sam. Though the latter had walked a good many miles, despite his wound, he might now be in bad shape; he could even have died after getting a wagon ride to town.

Presently, Dave encountered another of the reasons for there having been not a shot fired either in fun or in anger during the entire evening: another shotgun-toting marshal, with the same features, pointed white beard, and cozily carried sawed-off. Dave stopped and asked, "How come you got a foot shorter since you talked to me?"

"Ain't never talked to you afore. I'm Short Smith. You're Medium Smith, huh?"

"Borrowing the name was purely accidental."

"That's what my brother figured it for. Keep acting medium, and there won't be no confusion," he advised, and moved on.

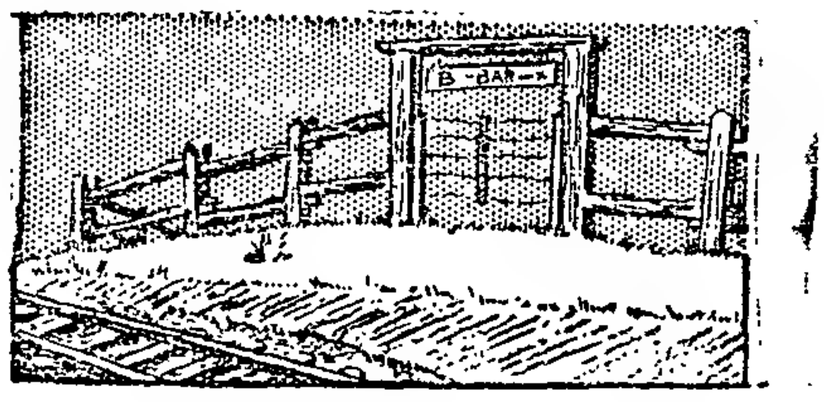
WHEN THE honky-tonk music finally quieted down, Dave approached the *Silver Palace's* back door. He went upstairs and tapped at the door of number twelve. The hall window gave him a view of the livery stable and the dobe corral.

At his second tap, Norma opened the door. She wore an embroidered crimson silk robe, and gilt slippers. Champagne and glasses sat on the bureau.

"How's the headache?"

"I've got over it all of a sudden. Fact is, I've been waiting, and the wine's been sitting here, getting warm."

"Well, I just dallied around," Dave answered. "I couldn't quite figure you'd really bust away so soon, just on my account." He laid out gold pieces to pay for the bottles which Norma had ordered. "You sit down, honey, and don't fret about the wine getting warm. Shucks, I don't want to drink none of that stuff anyway.



You keep it for weddings, funerals, or christenings and the like. I asked for it to do something sociable, account of taking up your time with my gabbling."

"Oh, you're awfully sweet! Well, thanks." She dug a half emptied pint from her bureau. "Take a nip of man's liquor, Medium."

Getting her percentage on the champagne, which would now serve another customer, one who insisted on having his money's worth, convinced Norma she was dealing with a scholar and a gentleman. She leaned back in the rocker, grimaced, and downed a thimbleful of red-eye.

Her robe had slipped from one shoulder. The skirt of the garment, trailing away from her crossed legs, exposed a bruised patch the size of her hand, just north of the hose top. Her shoulder had dark mottlings he had not noticed in the dance hall. These details gave Dave his next cue; he relished the idea of using this luscious armful as a means of getting the deadwood on the crooks of Mesa Grande, after Jane had done him so much damage to help two of the *mesa's* toughest customers.

"Gosh, I bet Homer kicks you around," he exclaimed, after a pointed stare which made her rearrange the robe. "He ought to have his brains beaten out with a bootjack!"

"Oh, Homer isn't so bad. He just is inclined to take his drinking too seriously."

"Now if you was one of those square rigged heifers I saw waltzing around," Dave resumed, with increasing pity and indignation, "it'd be different. But you ain't built to get booted around like a squaw."

With a dainty touch which made the gesture a blend of shyness and presumption, he plucked the edge of the robe. She did have lovely legs, and no doubt about it; but Dave was laying it on heavily when, admiration and sympathy having had their expression, he patted the garment back into place and said, "You're sure stacked-up too beautiful for being handled rough. Why'n't you get out of this dang town? Ain't no posses looking for you!" He grinned impishly. "Not to arrest you, I mean."

"They'd never let me leave."

"They? Who's they?"

"Oh, I'm in debt. Clothes and things."

He hitched about, and contrived to jingle some of the gold in his pocket. "I bet Homer'd raise sand if he figured anyone aimed to help you pay off your bills. Now, you look here, honey—you help me, and I'll stake you to as much as I can. Maybe not enough, but every bit counts up." He glanced at the bottles of champagne. "Shucks, no, they ain't in the reckoning. I got them for sociability."

"You're awfully nice, Medium. What's troubling you?"

HE TOLD her how the Chapmans had held him up, and how he had run into Ben that very evening. He concluded, "So I don't know what to make of how Ben hemmed and hawed when I asked where was his partner. Maybe he figured on having Sam drygulch me, while Ben hung around town, looking innocent. If I could find out for sure about Sam, whether he's hurt bad, or just hiding out for reasons of his own, I'd know whether to stay here and finish my business, or light out fast and sudden.

"You tell me about the Chapmans and their kinfolk. I hear there's a heap of them."

"Some are hardcases," Norma answered. "Some are good people. But they all stick together. What kind of deal are you planning?"

He leaned close and said in a confidential tone, "It's something downright complicated. And, if I got caught short, I'd never get around to helping you with a bit of

spare change. Now, how about the Sanfords? They're Chapman kinfolk, I heard."

When Norma got through talking, Dave was pretty certain that the place to hunt the missing outlaw would be the stretch of farms and ranches in the vicinity of the abandoned mine. And with that much to work on, Dave decided to drop his father a line. He had learned that night that the mail contractor would arrive in the morning to make a pickup.

When he told Norma that he wanted to write to a man concerning a debt that was overdue, she gave him a sheet of paper on which he pencilled, *"I am on the job, and aim to make the grade in time to help you where you need it the most. If I don't come back with the bacon, you can bet I got smoked out trying."* For salutation, he had written, *"Dear Sir"*, and he had signed, *"Medium Smith."* He had purposely made the note as illiterate as the speech he had assumed. The old man would finally catch on, particularly if Dave did not return.

"You address it," he told Norma. "To Asa Hamlin. If it's in a woman's handwriting, there'll be less chance of the postmaster snooping or wondering. The way Long Smith and Short Smith check up on strangers, I can't trust anyone, excepting you."

As he picked up his hat, Norma caught his hand. "Don't be in a hurry, Meduim," she murmured; "it's not awfully late."

4

NORMA snuggled up, pressing close against him, with a tantalizing ripple of her body. "It's time I be dusting along," he protested, with conviction that melted before the glow of her eyes and inviting mouth. "Walt's liable to forget himself and come to work early."

"Oh, he won't mind," Norma wheedled. "You can look out my window and watch for his lantern."

The compromise was interrupted when the door slammed open, and Homer Crane stamped into the room. He was on the prod, and none too steady on his feet. "Had a headache, eh? Couldn't say a civil word to me!"

"Keep your shirt on, pardner!" Dave exclaimed as with one move he sidestepped and got shed of an armful of girl. "I ordered wine, and there's no law saying it's got to be drunk down there in all that hooraw and noise."

Crane glared in the face of logic. "You got a headache, too?" he snarled, and blinked, and shook his head.

Seeing the gold pieces on the bureau, he took another step. Norma grabbed for the coins. Crane snatched her wrist and gave it a savage wrenching; she cried out and dropped the money. His brisk slap swept her against the bureau's edge. She missed her balance and landed with a thump.

Dave hauled off and planted Crane a crisp one. The man clawed for his gun. With one hand, Dave knocked the weapon aside. At the same time, he drew his own, and clipped him across the head. "Drop that gun, or I'll pistol-whip you from here to hell and back, you short-horned son!"

From down the hall, a man called, "Homer, they're getting mighty impatient, holding up that game whilst you raise more cash! You aiming to come back and see Baldy's raise, or are you too busy cleaning house?"

Dave got a sudden chill. Not only did his encounter with Crane put him in a bad spot; the man coming up the hall made things worse. There was something familiar about the voice; he gave Crane another wallop, and with everything he had.

Crane folded, but without dropping his colt. As he landed, all asprawl, he jerked a shot. The blast was half muffled by his body, and by the

skirt of his long coat. He groaned, and flattened out, sending the fuming weapon skating across the floor.

Norma, recovering, had snatched a derringer from the bureau. White-faced, she gasped, "Look out!"

The man who came in on the run did not quite know what to expect. He knew there had been a shot, but the oddly muffled report, and the fact that it had followed a scuffle and a woman's outcry, must have led him to believe that there was not a gun fight, but simply the accidental discharge of a weapon. Still, as he came he fumbled for his pistol, not really intent on drawing.

He was Tom Blaine, the fugitive who had hidden in Jane Sanford's clothes closet; r e c o g n i t i o n was mutual. To Dave, this was the most dangerous man in seven states. As far as Blaine was concerned, he merely faced a man whose horse and gun he had taken. For a split second he did not know whether to raise his hands, or finish his draw.

Dave gave him no time to decide. He cut loose, catching Blaine high in the chest. The slug slammed him against the door jamb. Before he collapsed, Dave drilled him with two more. He was shooting for his life; one word of identification from Blaine would have been a death-sentence. But that word would not be spoken: the outlaw dropped, dead and with his gun just clearing leather.

Dave snatched the weapon and dropped his own near Homer Crane.

"Tell the law they wrangled and shot each other up," he gasped. "I'm going to work, right now!"

"Not leaving town?"

He paused at the window-sill. "That'd be a dead giveaway. I've got to sit tight. Homer won't know his own name for a couple days, and he'll never know just what did happen!"

And as men from the gambling rooms downstairs came up to join the honky-tonk girls who had piled out of bed to crowd into the hall, Dave went over the sill. He landed on the canopy which overhung the board walk. He dropped to the street which, aside from himself, was deserted, and made his way to the stable.

IT WAS only then that he began to realize that he was in a tight fix. While Tom Blaine had spoken his last piece, there was no telling what other Mesa Grande outlaws had been hanging around Palo Pinto to do their part in liberating the Chapmans; and any one of them would have become all too familiar with the face of Sheriff Hamlin's son.

Once the disturbance at the *Silver Palace* quieted down, Dave posted the letter. He was busy dishing out hay when Walt Harris showed up at the stable.

"You better watch your step," the old fellow warned. "Tangling with Ben Chapman the way you done last night is begging for trouble."

Dave shrugged. "I ran smack into him. Pretending I didn't know him'd get me nothing except making him think I was ready to be kicked around some more. But between you and me, I stayed pretty near out of sight the rest of the night."

After breakfast, for which he had no appetite at all, Dave caught up some sleep in the granary. Later in the day, he climbed into the loft to shift some hay; this extra chore gave him a chance to watch the main street.

Men perched on the horse trough, and hunkered down on the edge of the board walk, were busy palavering about how Homer Crane and Tom Blaine had shot it out in Norma's room. All Dave could get was snatches of talk: but while these confused him, he had reason to feel that the talkers were equally muddled as to how it had all happened, and why. This relieved Dave's anxiety to a degree, yet he remained mighty uneasy. He'd been dealt a pat hand, which isn't always a blessing.

Later, he got Walt Harris' version of the ruckus, and admitted he had been half awakened by what sound-

ed like gun fire. It seemed people were puzzled by Homer Crane's deadly shooting: wounded, pistol-whipped, and yet drilling his man with three slugs driven through a space little larger than a silver dollar. Norma, it seemed, was hysterical and wailing and talking nonsense of all sorts.

This last detail cheered Dave considerably, though he still felt as if he had red ants crawling all over him.

He got a sharp jerk, that afternoon, when a buckboard came up the street. Jane Sanford was driving. Dave recognized her from way off, but could not believe his eyes until she swung into the entrance of the dobe-walled wagon part of Walt Harris' place. After a few words with Walt, she made for the general store. Once she was on her way, Dave came down from the loft to help load the oats she had ordered.

"Medium," Walt said, "soon as we get this feed boosted up, you drive this shebang over to the store and pick up the vittles and such like she's ordering. Then bring the team back and unhook 'em, she'll be visiting around town for a spell."

"Walt," was the earnest answer, "I don't want to be anywhere near that gal. She looks a bit too much like someone I got reasons for not seeing. And I can't take any chances."

Walt wagged his head. "Hmmm... being as she's kin to the Chapmans, maybe you're right. If Ben's really sore about last night, your being within talking distance of Jane might give him sort of an excuse for trouble with you. Even in a town strict as this'n, fighting about women folks is sort of counted as an act of God, and the law ain't as downright tough about it."

Dave dug in and stacked hay until he had made room in the loft for the lot Walt was expecting. He cleaned that chore up in jig time and was looking for something else to do when Norma, all out of breath, bounced in from the back of the corral. "Medium!" she gasped. "Get out, quick! While you can!"

"Uh—what's happened, honey?"

"Homer's come to life enough to tell what happened! He described you." She clung to him, kissed him, then broke loose. "Get out this minute! And if they do catch you, don't say I warned you!"

She bolted back the way she had come in.

Dave grabbed a saddle from the rack. He hated to steal a horse, but he'd live longer if he did take one.

OF A SUDDEN, Mesa Grande, anything but a noisy town, became ominously silent. Dave, with both hands full of riding gear, was making for the corral when without warning, a man called from behind him, "Hold it! You ain't going for no ride!"

Dave turned and faced Short Smith and his sawed-off. He started to raise his hands; he started next to set the horse gear down; and he ended by standing in place, looking dismayed.

"What's wrong, marshal?"

"You shot and pistol-whipped Homer Crane; you shot the spots outen Tom Blaine. And that gal, Norma, she covered up for you; only Homer come to, and I'm putting you in the hoosegow till he makes up his mind if he'll croak or pull through."

Both hands filled with saddle and gear, Dave took a step or two. Short Smith turned with him. Dave stopped, looked about, and mumbled, confusedly, "Better leave this stuff —hey, I ought to let Walt know—"

"Move along! I'll tend to telling Walt!"

"Uh—I was supposed to tend to —look here, you got to run me in right this minute?"

Short said, ironically, "No, I might give you a chanct to pick yourself a hoss, so's you could ride back later."

Dave shrugged resignedly. He sidestepped to make for the rack. During his intentionally clumsy maneuvering, he managed to get the latigo straps and cinch dangling down. Then the blanket slid from the

saddle and fouled up with his feet. He let out a gasp and a grunt, and stumbled over a latigo strap. He lurched, but it was not quite the accident it seemed to be.

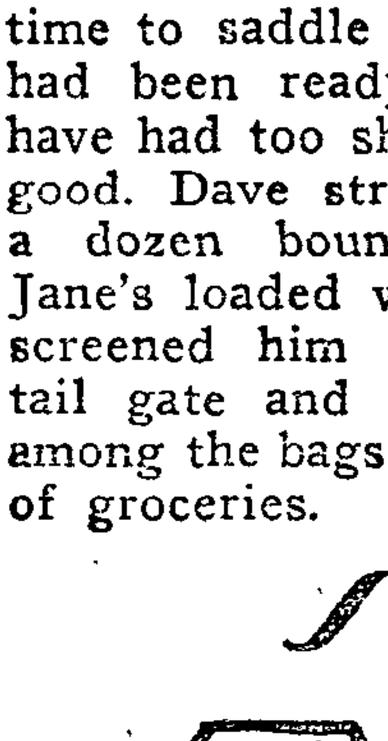
Actually well-balanced, he did not fall in a heap; he did not drop the saddle. Instead, he straight armed it at Short Smith, and followed through.

Where a gun-fighter would never have had a chance, Dave's faked awkwardness did the job; the sawed-off never got into line. The heaved saddle blocked it. Dave's weight compounded the attack. He drove Short against the granary wall.

Both barrels let go, doing no harm at all. Now that the weapon was useless, Dave had a free play. He drove his knee half way through Short's stomach, knocking him helpless. With the edge of his hand, he clipped the marshal at the base of the head, blotting him out completely. He grabbed a handful of shells from Short's pocket, dumped the man into a grain bin, and then snatched the shotgun.

Voices and footfalls told him that the rumble of the gun had been heard all over town. There was no time to saddle up. Even if a horse had been ready to ride, he would have had too short a start to do any good. Dave stretched his legs. Half a dozen bounds brought him to Jane's loaded wagon. The dobe wall screened him as he went over the tail gate and made himself a nest among the bags of feed, and the heap of groceries.

5



THAT night, some hours after his clash with the marshal of Mesa Grande, Dave and Jane Sanford sat huddled in a corner of the ruins of the abandoned stage station, which was not far from her uncle's farm. Dave's strategy had succeeded because Short Smith, when he recovered from his mauling, searched all the likely hiding places, and completely ignored the wagon. Those who had come running at the sound of the shotgun were confused by finding no trace either of Short Smith or the man at whom he had presumably fired. The search had finally centered on the second floor of the *Silver Palace;* and about then, Jane, all unaware of her hidden passenger, had set out for the long drive home.

He had not revealed himself until she was near the old station, and despite the gathering dusk, the risk of observation had forbade their exchanging more than a few words. Now, well after supper, Jane was back, to hear his story, and to give him her side of what had happened in Palo Pinto.

"The more I thought of everything," Jane was saying, "the more I dreaded facing you. I couldn't bear the thought of facing the town, either. People had been awfully nice to me."

"You didn't waste much time leaving."

"I carried my things to the vacant house next door to the stage station, and I left early in the morning."

"You might've left a note," he reproached.

"Oh, good Lord, Dave, no! That would have encouraged you. I'd caused you so much trouble that I was desperate. I had to stop it, for once and for all, all this that had grown up between us, loving each other when the deck was stacked against us from the start.

"I came back here because I felt like hiding. After what I'd done to you, just by being in Palo Pinto, it seemed as if fate had buckled down to teaching me a lesson. Teach me not to try to be too different from my own people. So here I am—quite the fine lady, getting more and more credit for my cleverness—*my* cleverness, mind you!—that's how they put it—in saving Sam and Ben."

"I begin to see," Dave admitted, "Anyway, stumbling blindly, I found you; that's all that counts.

Though if Tom Blaine had seen and recognized me, without my knowing it, I'd not be here to tell you so. For once, I had my luck when I needed it."

The darkness of the ruins, and the silence of the *mesa*, and Jane's clinging to him, mouth to mouth, made him think of those evenings in Palo Pinto. For a moment, it seemed unreal and improbable that he was getting ready for a showdown with two outlaws. The girl in his arms was a promise and a temptation. Yet he could not dismiss the memory of that letter he had written the old man. He wished that he had not written it: and he was also glad that he had.

JANE SEEMED to read the deeply-buried thought. She drew away, and said, very slowly, as though something had dragged her back to reality, "You've found me, Dave, but I'm not what you came to find. You're hunting Sam and Ben."

"Wait a second! A one-man posse to take that pair of hardcases?"

"I heard about you in town today. How Ben and Sam tried to take your horse, and how you had words with Ben in a saloon. They still don't know in Mesa Grande who you are, but that scrape with Homer Crane lifted the roof." Then, with a touch of sharpness in her voice, she added, "You didn't lose much time finding yourself a lady-friend, did you? Particularly if you came hunting me."

"I was sizing up the town, and that was the easiest way of picking up gossip. I was supposed to be on the dodge, and I was playing the part. You've got no reason to be jealous."

"Oh, Dave, I'm not jealous," she protested. "I simply know you didn't come here to find me. You might've suspected I'd lose heart and go back to my own people, but if I had been your only reason, you'd not have been so hot on the heels of two fugitives!"

"Have it your own way!" he snapped, impatiently.

"You're trying to make good by taking them back, dead or alive. That's it, isn't it?" And when he did not answer, she repeated, "It is, isn't it?"

"If you're so sure, why ask me?"

"Because you can't do it, Dave, it's more than any one man could do. I know. I'm not guessing, I know, and I want you to believe me before it's too late. You do trust me, you do believe I didn't knowingly have a hand in that trouble in Palo Pinto?"

"You could not have," he said, after a moment of deliberation. "You and I had been serious about each other weeks before the old man nabbed your cousins. And if you had been planning dirty work, you would most surely not have told me, that night, who you were and who your people were. Because the trick might not have worked that night, and if you had told me, you would have risked there not being another chance to help a jail break and make a monkey of me in a way to hurt dad's campaign."

She drew away from him. "You have to prove things as though you were in court! You hide your law-school studies by talking like everyone else out here, but your mind works like a lawyer's!"

"The logic," he said, earnestly, "was so much against you that I had to pick every bit that made a case for you. Because I wanted to believe in you, couldn't help believing in you."

Jane sighed, contentedly. "That last was more like it, Dave, it came from heart. It means so much—well—if—if you still want me, let's leave, quickly, before it's too late." She dipped into the vee neck of her dress and drew out a diamond ring which was on a chain, with a locket. "Your engagement-goodbye present—that'll be our grubstake while you work up a law practice somewhere. I'll sew, I'll take in washing, anything at all."

"Better wait until you're supposed to go to Mesa Grande for supplies. That way, we'd have a better start. A whole day before you were missed."

"Oh," she flared up, "you prefer a honeymoon in a tumbledown dobe! No, you're gunning for Ben and Sam."

"What you really seem to want is to get me away from here before I do something of the sort. You can make it really safe for them by telling them I'm here, and waiting for them!"

Jane laughed softly. "When posses don't dare stick their noses into the mesa, is one man so dangerous?"

Dave chimed in on the laugh. "You better be sneaking home, or you'll end up by making your folks wonder why you're looking so peaked for lack of sleep."

AS SOON as Jane left, Dave set out to recover the carbine and field glasses and saddle bags he had hidden on his way into the mesa. In the morning, he settled down to study the country. He watched the movements of sodbusters, and of small bunches of cattle. He scanned the slopes of the barrier he had crossed to come into this outlaw country. Most of all, he watched Jane's uncle, and her cousin, Amos Sanford, as they went about their work.

The Sanfords, Dave reasoned, must be in touch with the Chapman boys. In burrowing himself out of sight in the cargo Jane hauled back from town, he had noticed a dozen boxes of .30-30 cartridges, and as many .45s. No one-horse outfit ever bought anywhere near that quantity of ammunition.

The following night, Jane came to renew her plea; and as before, Dave said, "I'm waiting for the right time to leave."

Jane flared up, "You're working like a stock-detective, or a bounty-hunter! No thought of making an arrest. Just shooting them in the back. Oh, I know they're hardcases, but you're putting me in an awful position, you're making it as if I were dryguleching them myself."

"You can be sentimental about a couple of cousins, or you can be all for me," he retorted, fiercely. "Turn me over to them, if you're so squeamish. And take this grub back—I've got enough jerky to keep me going."

As he expected, she left at once, and in tears. And Dave followed as closely as he dared. Her thoroughly mauled feelings made this easier. When she neared the house, the dog barked. She spoke to the critter, and though he must have scented Dave, he made nothing of it.

"Used to strangers, pays no attention, long as one of the family says it's OK," he reasoned.

Dave sneaked into the barn to count the horses. He noted no sound nor sign of anyone sleeping in the hayloft. Presently, he caught the smell of carbolic acid. It came from the wagon. He risked striking a match, and found the bottle. Label and cork were fresh; the cork had come out. Diluted, the stuff was often used for doctoring gunshot wounds.

There had been a light rain. He looked at the wagon brakes, and knocked off some caked mud. It was not road or farm earth. Ore, pulverized in a stamp mill and then cyanided, had a look all its own. When he left, he was sure that the Sanfords had a peculiar interest in someone hanging out at the abandoned mine. Dave now saw his next move; he was prepared for everything, in fact, except what was waiting for him at the dobe.

He had barely cleared the break in the crumbling wall when he sensed a stirring in the darkness. Someone lurked inside. A chill of apprehension tightened him. He went for his Colt as he stopped, breathless.

Somewhere ahead, he heard the dry click of a gun being cocked. Then a whisper: "Dave, is that you?"

Though it was a woman's voice, he drew back, and warily countered, "Come out and see."

"It's me," she answered. "Norma."

She struck a match.

He would not risk being dazzled by the flame. "Come here," he de-

manded, averting his eyes. "What's all this about?"

She was beside him before she said, "You're so suspicious."

"What's this 'Dave' business?"

"I was afraid you'd be jumpy enough to shoot if I called you 'Medium'."

"So you know who I am?"

"Well, I ought to! I saw you from my window. Getting into Jane Sanford's wagon. Short and Long Smith nearly tore the *Silver Palace* to pieces."

"How'd you get here?"

"I walked. I hid and watched the Sanford place for signs of you, and I followed her over here. When she left, you lit out after her so fast I didn't dare speak. Anyway, I heard all you two said."

"You walked from town? That's a good twelve-fifteen miles."

"Dave, I had to! Homer's going to live. They suspect I warned you. Walt Harris told me that after helping you, I'd better get out while I could. You've got to take me along, Dave, my life won't be worth a Confederate bill if the story sticks to me, and grows."

"You mean they'd knife a woman?"

THAT NORMA might be trailed from town put him in a sweat; and then there was the risk that Jane, finding him forted up with a dance hall girl, would turn against him. But Norma's fears concerning her own safety were well grounded, he realized, when she went on. "The whole country's getting jumpy. There's been so much deviltry, so many outlaws at large here that the governor is going to clean up. A long rider came in with the story, right from Santa Fe. And someone else told about a couple of U. S. Marshals, new ones, nosing around. Woman or no, anyone suspected of having truck with anyone like that will be a dead duck in no time. You're supposed to be one of them. That's the latest. If it had hit town a couple of hours earlier than it did, Short Smith'd never bothered trying to arrest you. He'd've just poured it to you and said you'd tried to pull a gun on him."

"Has Ben Chapman been seen around town since I talked to him?"

"He left."

Dave pondered for a moment. With Norma to give him a hand, he could play his growing hunch; and it was beginning to sound like a bad case of have to. "Can you drive a team, I mean, hell bent? Are you willing to dodge lead, if need be? If the answer is yes, we've got a good chance to get out."

Norma caught him with both arms. Kiss and clinch were anything but dancehall routine; she meant them both. "To the last jump, Dave, yes! I don't know what you're up to, but I'm for it."

"Better wait till I tell you what it'll be."

Dave explained his plan. Norma let out a long breath, and said, "You ought to have your head examined, but if you're game, I am. You mean, though, you'll leave Jane here?"

"There's no way out of it, honey," he said, somberly. "She undertook to doctor a wounded man, just like anyone'd do, even for a stranger. Never dreaming I'd be here to take him. A wounded man can pull a trigger just as hard as an able bodied one, and it'll be my hide or the other fellow's. And if I can nab him alive, the ride is likely to finish him. And just about anywhichway it works out, it's bound to finish me, with her—not because they're kinfolks, but because I've got to pour it to a cripple she's been tending to."

6

IT WAS tough going, hoofing it toward the old mine that very night. Shortly before dawn, Dave and Norma found cover beneath the overhang of a deeply undercut gully bank. Toting his gear, and half

dragging the exhausted girl, had about played him out. The long day's rest, however, refreshed them, so that by nightfall, they were ready to close in.

When they resumed their march, they could just distinguish the smoke stack and the dark mass of the ore hopper which towered above the mouth of the shaft. The office, the tool dresser's shop, the bunk houses and other shacks were sprawled on the ledge below the entrance. Dave at last stopped beside an ore car which, run off the tracks, lay on its side. It was made of iron.

"You stay here. You'll be safe from stray bullets, and I'll know where to find you."

Leaving the saddle bags and Winchester with Norma, he took Short Smith's sawed-off shotgun and began his prowl. His plan was simple: nab and hogtie the Chapmans, wait until one of the Sanfords or some other neighbor drove up, and then take the wagon for the getaway. That was how he had explained it to Norma, but as he came to grips with his task, its dismaying possibilities cut up a devil's dance in his brain. He began to recognize his actual reason for having so readily strung along with Norma. While she undoubtedly would come in handy in a pinch, her greatest value was that no matter what happened to him, she would get away. In the end, the news would reach Palo Pinto and justify him. Where a man might not skin through, a woman would have a chance.

A dim glow, reflected from the weathered siding of a building, gave him a thrill of anticipation. He caught the savory odor of soup or stew. Someone was warming up kitchen-cooked food for a wounded man. This didn't smell like camp grub. Then he caught the scent of horses. After a moment, he could just distinguish the outline of a wagon, and the graying blurred shape of the near animal. The Sanfords had a bay and a fleabite.

The team, unattended, was still warm from the climb. Instead of advancing, Dave hustled back to get Norma. As they approached the wagon, he said, "You scrunch down under the seat and be ready to pop up if anyone tries to drive off."

Remembering the derringer she carried, Dave considered the possibility that if Jane were with Sam Chapman, she would be the one most likely to make for the wagon; and he did not want to put her at the mercy of another woman.

"You better give me that gambler's gun you're toting. They're no good at all unless you jam them right up against what you're shooting at. Take my Colt, it makes a better show."

It was not until the exchange was made that Norma answered, "If you're afraid of what'd happen if your lady and I got down to hair pulling, don't worry. I won't shoot, I'll just clip her gently. Nobody's going to make me walk another inch!"

"If you hear a ruckus, don't you stampede and leave me to walk!"

"I'll stay right here until you come for me to hogtie whoever needs it. Though you're a pure fool if you palaver; pour it to them on sight."

Some minutes later, Dave located a small building from whose two side windows came a murky light. There was so much rubbish about the shack that he dared not risk getting near enough to the windows for a look. Though the wind was loud enough to blur the voices of the men inside, it would not mask the rattle of tin cans, or the cracking of dry wood underfoot. He listened until he was sure there were only two men. Had there been a woman in the shanty, she would by now have said something.

Jane might even now be on her way back to the wagon. He had to open the show before she tangled with Norma. A woman's scream would start as much hell popping as would a shot.

The sawed-off held at his hip, Dave kicked the door wide open. "Hoist 'em!"

THE TWO men squatting on the floor beside their blankets

jumped up so fast that one, nearly toppling over, came near knocking the lantern from its peg on the wall. They were caught short; but for a moment, Dave was as dismayed as they.

One of the pair was sharp faced Ben Chapman; the other was Joash Webb, old man Hamlin's deputy. This was a hard moment for the man whose very presence and interrupted sociability made it certain beyond any doubt that he had arranged the jail-break, and the frills which would defeat his chief at the polls. Bad for Webb, but almost as bad for Dave, since there was no telling where the other Chapman was, nor what sidekick was with him. Webb might not have come alone. Having bitten off a big mouthful, it was up to Dave to chew fast, or choke.

"Shuck your guns," he commanded.

Webb retorted, "Dave, you're going off half cocked, you're sure jumping to conclusions. Put that gun down, and I'll tell you what is what."

"Shuck that hardware—the both of you."

Dave spoke so quietly that the two must have realized how close he was to cutting them down without further parley. Fumblingly, they unbuckled their belts. Their holstered weapons thudded to the floor. With a narrow gesture of his gun, Dave herded the pair backward, and toward the saddles and horse gear in the corner.

"Webb," he ordered, "take that riata and build a loop on the floor." When this was done, he added, "The both of you step into it. Get in front of him, Chapman. Pick it up, get the loop under your arms, keep it in place."

Shifting slightly so that he had the both covered, Dave crouched. Holding the twelve-gauge single handed was none too easy. However, he contrived to keep it in line by wedging the butt between elbow and hip bone. Thus poised, and watching his prisoners, he was bound to teeter and sway a little as he fished and fumbled for the free end of the riata. They changed color during his maneuvering. His least slip was likely to unbalance the gun suddenly, and throw its weight against his trigger finger. It was not until Dave straightened up, and backed off to take up the slack, that Webb licked his lips and asked. "What are you fixing to do?"

"I can take you to Palo Pinto, or I can pour it to you right here. It's your choice."

"Dave, you listen to me," Webb began, earnestly. "I came out here to talk for the Governor of Arizona and the Governor of New Mexico to whack up a deal with all these long-riders. A sort of truce, so they can get out, or else the army's coming in with martial law. You're upsetting things, and this glory hunting of yours will force these fellows back into being outlaws for keeps."

He spoke convincingly. Moreover, there had been such arrangements in the past. The territorial governor had made an amnesty offer to Billy the Kid and his crowd, in an effort to stop the Lincoln County cattle war, and the bloody feuds which had come out of it.

"If that's true," Dave countered, "prove it to me later. Get a move on, and don't stumble. First jerk on the rope, and I cut loose both barrels."

Bound together by the loop, they went lockstepping along. Neither could hope to bolt in the darkness which might otherwise have tempted them to risk a desperate move. And as the pair minced over the threshold, Dave quit worrying about the missing Sam and whatever partner might be with him. No one who valued the lives of the prisoners would dare fire at the man who herded them. Though drilled dead center, muscular twitch would make Dave jerk the trigger.

Having hostages heartened him enormously. Once this pair was hog-tied, he'd come back to finish his chore.

THEN, WITHOUT any warning, Dave learned that he had overlooked one weak spot. From his left,

a .45 roared. The flash was so near that it blinded him. Flecks of burning powder stung him. The bullet smashed against the lockplate of the sawed off. It swept the weapon aside, and so suddenly that though one barrel did blaze away, the charge went wide by a couple of yards. The gun itself, torn from Dave's grasp by the impact, clattered into the darkness.

Sam Chapman hobbled through the eddying smoke and from behind his levelled peacemaker, he snarled, "Get back in there!"

For an instant, Dave had the crazy urge to grab the derringer and get in one shot before it was too late; but his hand was for the moment useless because of the wrenching and hammering which had disarmed him. He could do nothing but wonder why he had not been cut down by a second blast. Mechanically, he obeyed, backing into the shanty as his rescued prisoners got free of the riata.

"All right, Ben," Sam Chapman commanded, "take that rope and tie him good before—"

From outside came a cry of dismay. Despite Sam's trying to block Jane as she cleared the doorway, she thrust herself past him, and protested, "You promised me you'd let him go, you swore you would!"

"Said I'd not cut him down. I'm not going to, and Ben ain't going to. We've got someone here to herd him away. You run along now, you go back home, everything's all right."

When Jane's expression changed, Dave sensed that this was her first sight of her cousins' visitor, and that only now did she fully realize that while the Chapmans could well enough release the son of Sheriff Hamlin, the renegade deputy would not let Dave live long enough to circulate the story of the confab with outlaws.

"Sam," she cried, "it's cold-blooded murder, turning him over to Joash Webb. And so this is the friend who fixed everything up in Palo Pinto. And made such a show of me! After that, you might show me a little consideration!"

Sam, face drawn with pain and wrath, retorted stubbornly, "I promised if you didn't screech or let out a sound, I'd not cut him down. I saved Ben's hide, and I kept my word."

"Oh, you've kept your word! I've doctored you, and uncle and I have as good as made ourselves outlaws to help you, and here you're splitting hairs, telling me you've kept your word."

"M'am, you're plumb wrought up," Joash Webb interposed, with all his political joviality. He picked up his

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gun belt, and buckled it on as he continued, "I came here as a peacemaker, to fix it up so's all that want to can go straight, without any glory hunting lawmen hounding them. The governors knew they couldn't make any such proposition to a man like Dave's dad, who's always took a personal pride in manhunting. All I aim is to hustle Dave away to give these boys here a chance to be law-abiding like they want to be."

During that smooth talk which the troubled Chapmans hoped would quiet Jane's reproaches, Dave saw a letter lying by the horse gear. It was addressed to Asa Hamlin. The size of the envelope and the handwriting identified it as the one Norma had addressed. The uncancelled stamp was the final proof that Joash Webb had well established and c r o o k e d connections in Mesa Grande. All this prodded Dave to action, and right when the enemy was, reasonably enough, more concerned about Jane than about their prisoner.

"I'll win the election for dad!" he shouted as he whirled toward Webb and drew the derringer.

Getting the renegade was more important than the recapture of the Chapmans had ever been.

SAM YELLED and went for his gun. Jane snatched his wrist before he could level the weapon. Webb had his Colt only half clear of leather when Dave nailed him from a range of less than two yards. The one-ounce ball knocked Webb stem-winding. Dave lurched after him, and kicked the six-gun from his grasp as he got it out of the holster.

Sam, though pain wracked and weak, swept Jane off her feet. She landed against the wall with a thump and a flurry of skirts. Ben stumbled over her as he darted for the belt he had shucked, and had not yet put back on. This blocked Sam for an instant: and when he fired, he chimed in a split second after the dull cough of the derringer's lower barrel.

Behind Dave, guns blazed. When he closed in, to keep the badly wounded enemy from pulling another shot, he saw that Ben was on the floor, kicking and clawing. Jane, white-faced, held Joash Webb's smoking Colt. She stood there, and stared at the cousin she had riddled. And her face told Dave that this time, Jane had made a final break from her kinsmen; there could be no return to them.

Neither of the outlaws lived long enough to be jailed; and before the hard drive ended, in the plaza of Palo Pinto, it was clear that Joash Webb would not last until election day.

When Dave pulled up in front of the hoosegow, he saw his father heading the crowd that poured from the Eldorado Bar. "Dad, take a look at what I brought back," he called. "No, I don't mean the girls!" Then, standing in the wagon bed beside his cargo, he told how the hunt had ended. He concluded, "Joash finally opened up and said he had figured that by turning the Chapmans loose, they and their side kicks would quit rustling and pulling holdups in this county, and he'd keep peace without having to hound them the way you always did. He'd have nothing to do but get fat on the fees of office."

The old man eyed Norma and Jane. "You do right well, but even for a young fellow, two of 'em is just too much."

"Don't worry," Norma chipped in. "I'm just passing through."

Dave took a hitch in his belt. "Jane is staying," he announced. "We are settling down right here in Palo Pinto. I am building up a law practice right here, if we have to live on mesquite beans and horned toads till I get a start."

For the first time in years, the most important man in Verde County quit looking like an election poster. "You take those gals to the house. And while they're getting prettied up and rested, you meet me at the Eldorado. I am holding open house to welcome you and your outlaw woman. And before all the witnesses the place will hold!"

●

FLINT and the Pound of Flesh

Flint lit the fuse . . .

An "Uncle Reb Steele Story"

by Allan K. Echols

THE DAY had been a scorcher even for July in Adobe Wells, and now in the cool of the evening, Uncle Reb Steele was stretched out in his old swivel chair, his shirt open at the neck and a slight breeze ruffling his silky white hair. His feet were propped up on the slide board of his rolltop desk,

Gabe Flint had this last coup all planned down to every detail, and Uncle Reb couldn't stop him. But, there was a good chance that he could make the business a very unprofitable one for old Flint. Yep, he'd take a leaf right out of Shakespeare, Uncle Reb would!

and an opened volume of Shakespeare's "Merchant of Venice" lay across his ample middle. His eyes were closed and his reading glasses perched on his forehead.

The kindly old cowboy lawyer was not asleep, but was pondering on the subject that interested him most; the greed and evil that was in mankind, the useless bickering that made lawyers necessary. Whenever he found the milk of human kindness souring within him he had a habit of turning back to classic literature, to reassure himself that the men and women in the old days were just about as vicious and greedy as were some of the people today.

As people like Gabriel Flint, for instance.

The dollar-hungry old Gabe hadn't been up to any of his worst tricks in some time, and Uncle Reb had begun to wonder whether or not time had begun to mellow the hardware man. He was on the verge of admitting that the old skinflint was becoming almost human.

And then he began to hear that Flint coveted the old Magruder blacksmith shop, and to Flint, to covet meant to scheme.

In light of the fact that the native sandstone building on the corner past Flint's store belonged to the widow of Donnie Magruder, who took in washing to support her three kids less than twelve years old, Uncle Reb felt that pretty soon they would be seeing old Flint in action. This made Uncle Reb sad, but he was not involved, so he tried to get his mind off the matter.

But he was not to escape it; there was the thumping of two sets of heavy feet on the stairs, and Doc Henry opened his door and came in, along with Deputy Sheriff and Dud Tatum, from over at the county seat.

Doc Henry was a pert little man with white chin-whiskers, glasses and a stomach. Tatum was six-feet four, well filled out, wearing a ruddy face set off with white china teeth, a big white hat, and the heaviest pistol in the heaviest scabbard that a man could buy.

Little Doc's face was grave, but Tatum grinned as he shook hands with the lawyer. "Glad to see you agin, Reb," he roared. "You feel in the mood to give Justice a little working over?"

Old Reb grinned and threw "The Merchant of Venice" over onto his littered desk. "I never violate the spirit of Justice, Dud," he answered. "Although there are some that claim I've been a little rough on the statutes once in a while. Anyway, what's on your mind?"

THE DEPUTY filled up a chair with his weight, and Doc perched on the corner of a book-filled work table. Tatum spoke: "I've got a job that I don't like. Seems that your friend, Flint, has filed a complaint in County Court that two feet of a building belonging to a Sally Magruder, a widow, sits on a lot of his. He claims that he wants to build on his lot, and he wants her to remove it from his land, and that she refuses to sell the empty building to him so he can tear it down, though he has made her a fair offer for it. Well, he got a hearing before old Judge Brown—who ought to be in a home for the feeble minded—and Brown gave him a court order permitting him to remove the wall from his property."

Uncle Reb wiped his eyes. "He's within the law there; if a person doesn't remove his property from your land, you can get an order permitting you to remove it yourself."

"Yeah, I know," the deputy agreed. "This order was issued some time ago, but I was only instructed this afternoon to serve it on Mrs. Magruder, and I was told not to serve it till eleven thirty o'clock tomorrow morning. The order is effective at twelve noon. Court is closed tomorrow on account of the Fourth of July, so when she gets the notice, it will be too late for her to do anything to stop it."

"But you came out tonight?"

"Yeah. I know this Flint by reputation, and I smelled something fishy. Of course, in serving a paper, I'm only acting as an official messenger for the court; I can't do a

thing but follow instructions. But I thought I'd come out tonight for two reasons. It's a cooler ride than it will be in the heat of the day tomorrow, and then I remembered that you and Doc and some of the boys owed me seventy-six dollars you crooked me out in that last stud game, and I thought maybe I could get even. And then—I was just curious about what Flint had up his sleeve. It didn't smell right, so I asked Doc about it, and he brought me up here. If there's anything I can do—"

Doc interrupted. "Reb, I don't reckon you know the whole story, and I know Tatum doesn't. I do; I'll tell you both what I know, and maybe you can figure something out, Reb."

Uncle Reb had, of course, known some of the facts, but Doc told the whole story straight through for the benefit of both him and Tatum.

"About fourteen years ago young Donnie Magruder married Sally. Donnie was a big strapping youngster as big as you, Dud, and the workingest fool I ever saw. Been on a ranch all his life, and didn't have much education, but he had ambiton, and he was a genius working with tools. Could make you a wagon or a dresser or a plow as fine as you ever saw. So when him and Sally married, he bought him those three fifty-foot lots down at the corner, and built him a blacksmith and wagon shop on the corner lot. He hauled every piece of stone in the building himself, and laid it by hand. Built the whole fifty-foot building, roofed it and everything with his own two hands. He had the strength of an ox, and the willingness and the know-how to make something for himself.

"Well he was doing good. The kids came along, and he was making money. Then he got arthritis; his hands got all twisted up; his joints got stiff, and he was in bad shape, and kept getting worse. Got so bad he couldn't do his work, and he was spending money trying to get cured. This went on for years, getting worse all the time.

"When he couldn't work at his trade any more, and had spent all he'd saved, he got rid of his tools and used the building to start a little second-hand store. You know, used furniture and harness and plows and the like. And by this time, the arthritis had got down into his legs and they were stiff, and he was on crutches. That hurts a man who's been as active as Donnie was. And it hurt him worse because he wasn't making a living for Sally and the kids. He loved them something fierce.

"Well, his helplessness kept eating on his mind till he started drinking pretty heavy. Sally used to get me to talk to him when he got drunk, and he's sat in my office and cried like a baby. He wasn't a natural drunkard; it was his sense of defeat driving him crazy, knowing that he'd failed Sally and the kids. She understood and never held it against him.

"Well, when he couldn't even make a living with the second-hand store, he finally sold those two lots that he'd formerly used in connection with his blacksmithing and wagon building, to Flint when Flint put in his new store. I suppose Flint robbed him; but anyway, he went along drinking worse and worse, and Sally had to start taking in washing. She was game, though, and kept her chin up.

"Then Donnie got blind drunk one winter and went to sleep out in a blizzard, took pneumonia and died. He whispered to me that it was better that way, because Sally had the building left, and it wouldn't be so hard on her working for just the kids.

"Well, all the time Donnie was alive, Flint never discovered that Donnie's building wasn't all on the corner lot, but that Donnie had built it so that the west wall was two feet over on one of the lots he sold to Flint. Instead of being fifty feet wide, the building was fifty-two feet wide, so one wall is actually on the lot Flint bought from him."

UNCLE REB observed; "I wouldn't be so sure Flint hadn't discovered that before Donnie died. If I know him, he measured that ground to the inch before he bought

it; he probably knew that he could use that fact to his own advantage later, but didn't mention it while Donnie was alive, because if he'd made trouble Donnie would have killed him if it had been the last thing he did."

"I suppose so," Doc admitted. "Anyway, when Donnie built, I suppose it didn't matter to him how wide he built the building, since it was all his land. Anyway, Donnie's dead, and Flint wants that building; it's worth about fifteen hundred dollars, but Flint has offered her three hundred for it.

"Sally needs the money badly, but I advised her against taking it, so she turned down his offer. Then he sprang that wall business on her; told her she'd have to have the wall torn down and the building narrowed so that it would not be on his property. Says that since she won't sell, he'll have to build, and wants all his land to do it on.

"And of course Sally hasn't the money to tear the wall down; nobody will buy the building from her for what it's worth on account of that wall. So, Flint has got her just where he wants her. By getting that order to remove the wall himself, he can force her to sell to him at his price, or he can destroy the value of the building by tearing down the wall that's on his property."

"And so," the deputy sheriff said, "that's the kind of thing I have to do for a living. I'd rather serve this paper on Flint with the toe of my boot, but I'm just a public servant; Reb, think of something, can't you, you old shyster?"

"I'll try to get Judge Brown on the phone," Uncle Reb said. "I maybe can talk some sense—"

"You can't. He headed for the mountains on a fishing trip at noon today," Tatum said gloomily. "I'll bet Flint figured on that; he didn't want anybody to do anything till he got through with his good deed. Brown won't be back for a week, and by that time he could have a lot of that wall removed."

"A lot of it?" Uncle Reb answered, getting to his feet. "He could have all of it removed. He'd have to, to back up his threat. Now I think I know what's going to happen. I've noticed a man working on that wall for several days when I've passed going to the post office. He's been pounding small holes along its base with a hammer and chisel—"

"Dynamite!" the deputy exclaimed. "He's going to blow that wall down if she won't sell, then he'll be sure nobody will have a chance to restrain him. Can't you stop it, Reb?"

Uncle Reb was pacing the floor. "Let me see that court order," he said, and read it over three times before handing it back to the deputy.

"It enjoins anybody from interfering with him removing the wall from his premises," he said. "I don't see what we can do if he undertakes to get rid of it by blasting. But still—"

He paced the room wth his eyes half closed. "You can't just defy a court order," he explained. "Sometimes you can twist around them, but in this case—I don't know. I just don't know. I'll have to think it over till morning. Maybe something will come up."

Old Doc got to his feet, as did the deputy. "Well," Tatum said. "You coming on down to Doc's? You stole ten dollars and thirty-five cents from me in that last game with a pair of deuces backed when I thought you had a busted flush. I never forgive a thing like that."

"No. You all go on," Uncle Reb said. "I might join you later. Right now I want to finish reading that book I started."

Tatum picked the book up and twisted his mouth into a grimace. "A man reading Shakespeare when there's a stud game going on!" he exclaimed with disgust. "That's what's wrong with this country today."

●

AT ELEVEN o'clock Uncle Reb knocked on the door of Doc's house and went into the combined living room and office. The poker game was going on around a table

in the middle of the room, and Doc had a big stack of money in front of him. Jed Lonsdale, the banker, and three other businessmen greeted Reb when he came in, and told him to get a chair.

"Nope, I've got some work to do," Uncle Reb responded. "Tatum, want to take a little walk with me?"

Tatum was dealing. "Yeah, as soon as I finish this hand; I've got to teach these crooks a lesson."

He dealt a round face down and a round face up One man dropped out. Tatum had dealt himself an Ace up. He looked at his hole card. "Aces back to back!" he announced, and shoved in two dollars. Doc stayed with a deuce showing, and the rest stayed.

After each round, Tatum doubled his bet; "You thieves had better stay out unless you can beat Aces. I'm warning you," he said. "I'm going to punish you this time."

The last round, he dealt Doc a second deuce in sight and himself a second Ace in sight. No possible straights or flushes or other pairs were showing, and when Tatum shoved in twenty dollars, they dropped out. Doc called him and raised him twenty.

"In the face of three Aces?" Tatum boomed, and called and raised fifty. "You'll never learn this game, Doc. Better not call; I told you I had an Ace in the hole."

Doc called, and turned over his hole deuce, showing three of them. "Show me your third Ace and take my money," Doc moaned.

Tatum turned over his hole card—a four—and said, "Well I'll be damned! It must have changed spots when I wasn't looking. Take it, you crook."

He got up and put on his vest. "But don't spend it," he warned. "The next time, I'm going to send you home in a barrel. How come you raised when I told you I had an Ace in a hole?"

"We're just country boys here in Adobe Wells," Doc explained gravely, "but we learned a long time ago never to believe what a politician says." He was fingering the money. "And if you can't bluff old Flint into laying off Sally Magruder any better'n you bluff in a poker game, I feel sorry for the widow."

OUTSIDE, the deputy said; "Doc is sure a fine hombre, ain't he? I'd rather play poker with your little bunch of boys than eat, and I do love my vittles. You got anything figured out?"

"It's just a slim chance," Uncle Reb admitted, "and it depends on nothing going wrong at any step. Now about that court order; as you remember it, you were just told to serve it at eleven-thirty—but they didn't say *which* eleven-thirty, did they? That is, you could serve it at eleven-thirty tonight as well as eleven-thirty tomorrow?"

Tatum chuckled. "Now that you mention it, I believe the Judge did just say serve it at eleven-thirty. I wouldn't know which eleven-thirty he meant."

"That'll help me. It'll give me a little time to work," Uncle Reb answered, and then explained his idea to the officer.

Mrs. Magruder's house was dark when they reached it. It was a two-room shack with an old piece of corrugated tin nailed over the opening where one window should be, and with the porch sills rotted until the porch roof sagged wearily. In the moonlight they could see two black iron washpots sitting with their three legs on stones in the back yard, and a long board bench supported on boxes and lined with wash-tubs. It was a tragically poverty-marked layout.

"That poor old woman has worked herself almost to death," Uncle Reb said, "and never a yelp out of her. I suppose she's had more undeserved hard luck than anybody in this country. It sometimes tests a man's faith in the Lord."

He shouted at the door, and after he identified himself, Mrs. Magruder with a threadbare coat over her gown let them into a room with two iron beds in it, on one of which the three children slept under wornout patch quilts.

"This is Deputy Tatum, and he's got a paper to serve on you," Uncle Reb said kindly. "But first, let me tell you not to worry." He pulled out a legal paper. "This is a power of attorney, giving me authority to act for you; if you will sign it, I'll do everything I can to help you."

She signed the paper by the poor yellow light of her oil lamp, and then Tatum handed her the court order. Uncle Reb took it out of her hands and read it to her, and then explained its meaning.

"But I'd have had that wall moved if I'd had the money," the woman protested. "I told Mr. Flint I didn't have it, and he gave me to understand that I shouldn't worry. I'd have taken his offer of three hundred dollars for the building if I'd known he was going to do this. It will ruin the building, and I haven't the money to put the wall up where it belongs."

"Flint is probably expecting you to come running to him and accept his offer of three hundred when you learn his intentions. But I think I can make a better deal for you, if you'll let me try."

"Whatever you say, Mr. Steele, I know Donnie always trusted you."

"Thanks," Uncle Reb said. "Now, here's another paper I want you to sign. And then, Mr. Tatum and I are going to wake up Limpy Wimple and make him bring his wagon over here. You're going to be busy tonight, Mrs. Magruder. You're moving to your new home; we'll help you."

●

MIDMORNING was hot, but on account of the holiday and the goat roping they were going to have in the afternoon, there were quite a few ranchers and grangers in town, and Gabriel Flint's store was open when Uncle Reb Steele strolled in.

Old Flint was in his office reading a legal paper, which he quickly shoved into a pigeon-hole in his desk when the lawyer dropped in and sat down. Uncle Reb's face had the innocence of a cherub when he had something up his sleeve, and Flint, recognizing the sign, eyed him suspiciously. "What's on your mind?" he asked, trying to conceal a subdued excitement.

"I've got a piece of property I'd like to sell you. I can get you a deed to that Magruder building, if you want it now, for fifteen hundred dollars. It's worth it, and it might cost more later."

"What would I want with that old building?"

"I don't know," Uncle Reb purred. "You know, they want to relocate the post office, and they'd have rented it from Mrs. Magruder if she'd had the money to fix it up a little. You could do that and rent it to the government; they're good paying tenants."

From the look on Flint's face, Uncle Reb knew that he had guessed what was back of Flint's attempt to buy the place. "I don't want to fool with it," Flint said: "I've got enough to look after."

"I thought you wanted to buy it."

"Not really, I offered to take it off the woman's hands just to wreck it. I'm going to build on the lots between me and that building."

"A thousand dollars?"

"No, I told you I didn't want the building."

"All right," Uncle Reb sighed. "I just thought I'd give you a chance to buy it cheaper now than you can later. Say, you got any more of those books like I bought from you, those "Classic Library" things?"

"No, they were just some a book agent sold my wife."

"Good stories in some of them," Uncle Reb said fondly. "I was reading one last night. "Merchant of Venice." Seems this young fellow had to have some money, and he went to a man who hated him. This man who hated him let him have the money, but only after he agreed that if he didn't pay it back by a certain time, the lender could cut out a pound of his flesh nearest his heart. Well the kid couldn't pay him back, and so by the terms of the contract, this money lender had the right to cut his pound of flesh out of the

young fellow from a point nearest his heart. And then—"

"Yeah," Gabe Flint said impatiently. "I know all about it. My wife was telling me them stories when she read 'em. I don't think much of this Shakespeare hombre, writing about nothing but a bunch of Eye-talians killing each other off like flies. One of these Eye-talian kings name of Caesar something or other. He's got a friend named Brutus, and Brutus and some of his other friends gang up on him and stab him, and all he does is look at his friend and say, 'You too, you brute,' and falls over dead. And then about some Irishman named O'Tella or something. It's just a lot of trashy killings; I told my wife it was nothing for a woman to be reading that had housework to do. I don't want to waste my time even listening to 'em."

Uncle Reb shrugged, "I was just going to say, this fellow had a right to his pound of flesh, but—"

"Aw, I'm not even interested in that kind of junk," Gabe Flint said: "I've got a business to look after."

Uncle Reb got up, stopped at the door, then asked, "Sure you don't want to buy that building while you can get it at that price?"

"I never was surer of anything."

Uncle Reb went out, shaking his head sadly.

●

AT ELEVEN o'clock, Flint and two workmen came out into the lot between Flint's and the stone building carrying a box between them. They set to work stuffing sticks of dynamite in the holes which Flint had the forethought to have drilled earlier. Quite a crowd of people gathered around to watch, and the word got out that the wall was to be dynamited, and other people showed up, standing around, watching the work.

Mrs. Magruder had not come to surrender to Flint's terms.

At about a quarter of twelve, Dud Tatum put in his appearance for the first time and handed Gabe Flint a legal paper. Flint read it and a satisfied look crept over his face. He turned to the crowd watching the men set the fuses, and said: "Gents, this building wall has sat on my property ever since I owned it, and I did not complain. Now I need the room, and the owner refused to move the wall. I have here in my hand a court order permitting me to remove the wall from my premises. This officer is here to see that I am not interfered with when I remove the wall. Is that right, officer?"

"Why, yes," Tatum answered. "But if I was you, I'd wait—"

"Your duty is only to see that I'm not interfered with. Thanks. I'll go on with my plans."

Tatum shrugged and stepped back. Flint and his two workmen finished preparing the fuses.

Uncle Reb came through the crowd, his watch showing only a few moments until twelve. "You give a thousand?" he asked.

"No!" snapped Flint. "I offered her three hundred because I felt sorry for her. She'll take that in two minutes, or nothing at all; it's all the same to me."

"I didn't finish telling you that story this morning—" Uncle Reb started, but Gabe Flint walked away from him.

Uncle Reb winked at Tatum, then walked into the old stone building. The interior was not visible to the crowd because the broken glass windows had been boarded up. Tatum stood at the corner and watched Flint finish his preparations.

Flint shouted to the crowd to stand back, then lit the long fuse connecting all the sticks of dynamite which were distributed at four-foot intervals in the base of the wall.

Tatum stepped to the front door of the bulding as the fuse began to sputter, and spoke to Uncle Reb, concealed within the building. Uncle Reb answered.

Then Uncle Reb came out of the building—leading Mrs. Magruder and her three young children to safety across the street.

The crowd saw the fuse sputtering, and realized what a narrow escape the woman and children had experi-

enced. A murmur swept over the crowd of men in the street.

Flint saw what had happened, and his face paled. His lips went tighter, and he said nothing, but looked venom at Uncle Reb. He smelled the fact that Uncle Reb had a hand in the deal.

UNCLE REB led the family to the porch of the butcher shop across the street, and they sat on the bench under the awning out of the sun. He said, "Now don't worry, and don't go away, Mrs. Magruder; I might need you in a few minutes."

"You can't save the building?" she asked wistfully.

"No," Uncle Reb answered. "He's within his rights, so far." Then he disappeared into the crowd.

The explosion was deep and resonent. The brown, native stone wall of the building shivered, then rose slightly. Great cracks appeared in it as it swayed a moment, then toppled over slowly and came to rest in pieces on Flint's empty lot.

Then the roof sank slowly down toward the floor, and the two end walls and the far wall, pulled inward by the joists, came tumbling down within the perimeter of the wreckage. As the dust settled, there was nothing to be seen but stone rubble, twisted black roofing with its tarred paper town into pennants.

And resting within the wreckage, the crowd saw the bent remains of two iron beds, with tattered patch quilts askew; and an overturned coal oil stove, bent out of shape, and with smoke and a small tongue of flame licking up from it, feeding on the highly inflammable tar-soaked felt roofing. The wreckage was afire.

Gabriel Flint had got his pound of flesh.

The old skinflint stood back in his lot, his hands in his hip pockets, contemplating the task of removing the debris. He was humming softly when Uncle Reb and Dud Tatum joined him.

The officer said; "You consider that my duty in keeping away interference is finished?"

"Yes. Thanks," Flint said; "that's all."

"I don't believe it is all," Tatum said. "The court order said you was to remove that wall from your property, even if it is in pieces."

Flint looked puzzled, then said; "Oh, that's all right; I've got from now on to get the stones off."

"Yes, I guess so," the deputy said. "But you won't have time, I'm afraid."

"Why not?"

Tatum grinned. "Tell him, Reb."

Uncle Reb said; "Your order gave you permission to remove the wall from your property. You didn't do that, but that doesn't matter for the moment. The point is, that the order did not give you permission to touch or injure or damage any part of Mrs. Magruder's building which did not occupy your land. I think you've got to admit that you've done a pretty considerable amount of damage to her home. In fact, you've also wilfully and maliciously dynamited her dwelling house while it was occupied by her and her children; you're also clearly guilty of criminal negligence in not seeing that she was out of her house, even if you had a right to destroy it—"

"Here! How'd I know she was in there? She's been living over across town. I didn't know she was in there—"

"That's criminal negligence, which is a felony," Tatum said, pulling out a pair of handcuffs. "And I'm arresting you and taking you to jail for that. Hold out your hands."

"But I didn't know—"

"My heart bleeds for you," Tatum said. "The judge will be back next week, and the jail food is not bad."

He turned to Uncle Reb. "You got any more charges, Reb?"

"Well, it's a criminal offense to use dynamite in the town limits without a permit. And as for civil charges—" he dug into his coat and brought out a sheaf of papers—"I've already made out complaints for fifteen hundred dollars for complete destruction of the building, one thousand dollars for destruction of Mrs. Magruder's furniture, punitive

damages of five thousand dollars—that's punishment for endangering her life—and I'm looking up the law on about three more claims. And by the way, on the criminal side, you'd better also charge him with criminal assault until I can find out exactly what the stiffest charge is for dynamiting a building with people in it.

Tatum said coldly, rattling the handcuffs. "Hold out your hands, you baby-killer." The crowd was beginning to get in an ugly mood.

FLINT'S Adam's Apple began bobbling; he looked at the guileless Uncle Reb with panic in his eyes, and said; "This is your work, you rascal, you."

"I'm just protecting my client's interests," Uncle Reb said reproachfully. "I offered you a deal before you went after your pound of flesh, but you turned me down."

"I'm not going to stay in jail from now till next week," Flint growled. "What is it you want?"

"I wanted to sell you Mrs. Magruder's building for a thousand dollars. But now there's only wreckage. However, if you're interested in buying it, I'll give you a bargain. I'll sell you the wreckage, including about twenty dollars' worth of wrecked furniture, all for twenty-five hundred dollars. It's a bargain."

"You thief," Flint roared. "You'd have sold me the building intact an hour ago for a thousand."

"Yes, but since then, we've run up about seven thousand dollars' worth of claims against you, and we've got a street full of witnesses to back up our story. However, if you don't want buy the wreckage, we'll be satisfied with the seven thousand and a prison sentence for you. On the other hand, if you bought us out, we wouldn't have any claims against you."

He took another legal paper out of his pocket. "It just happens that Mrs. Magruder signed a deed to the place, made out in your name. There's the deed and the complaints. Twenty-five hundred in cash takes 'em all. And that's a real bargain; I don't think Tatum's jail food is as good as he claims."

Flint looked at the handcuffs, and at the papers, and then at the angry faces surrounding him. He wilted. "All right, I'll settle," he said, "But I never saw such thievery in my life."

Uncle Reb said, "Gabe, you should have let me finish telling you that story, and maybe this wouldn't have happened. You see, when that man in the story demanded his pound of flesh, the law agreed that he was entitled to it. But the man was warned that if in collecting it, he spilled one drop of the young fellow's blood, it would cost him his life. I was trying to show you that there are cases where a man can be legally right, but where he can hurt himself worse by clinging to those rights than by using common sense. But you wouldn't listen, like the man in the story did, and you got hurt. Gabe, maybe you ought to spend less time on arithmetic and more on reading. Some of Shakespeare's old Eyetalians, as you call 'em, weren't so dumb as you think."

●

A Powerful Novel of Midnight Mystery

BLOOD MONEY ON THE LINE

by Arthur J. Burks

leads off the current issue of

FAMOUS DETECTIVE STORIES

MEETING AT MATAMORAS

Only across the border could Carrigan find safety from his enemies, and there he found a still greater threat...and with it, a better reason for living than he'd ever had before!

The men who pursued Carrigan could afford to stop and rest, now and then, but Carrigan couldn't!

THE LAND was a huge, shallow bowl and the Rio Grande was the end of the land. Carrigan had the weird thought that the river was the edge of the world and that he would simply ride to that point and drop off. In his exhaustion, he found the idea amusing and forgot, for a moment, the men that were trailing him. It was the floundering of his horse that brought him back to reality and the present.

The animal stood, head down, on the shelving bank of the river and Carrigan knew that he had taken his last step. The gelding had been ridden hard and far in the past twenty-odd hours; it was time for Carrigan to leave him. Even as he slipped to the ground to strip the saddle and bridle from his horse, Carrigan heard the hoofbeats of the posse.

Travis Mitchell had traveled fast, too, but he had the advantage of a

Action Packed Novelet ★ ★ ★ By Ben Smith

fresher horse and a knowledge of the land above Brownsville. What had taken Carrigan hours, Mitchell and his men had covered in less than a half-day. The time Carrigan had spent feeling his way through the mesquite, Mitchell had used to good advantage following the open trail.

Carrigan's horse, rid of his weight, took a few steps away, heading in the direction of the hills away from the river. Carrigan watched him go; then, as the first spattering of shots reached his ears, Carrigan, fully clad, slipped into the Rio Grande.

Instantly the water caught him. The Rio was high, in Spring flood, laden with silt and broken trees, and Carrigan was tired. Still, the river was not the enemy that Mitchell was; there were times when the cross-currents even aided the swimmer. And, Carrigan knew that Travis Mitchell would never help the man who had killed his brother.

"April," Carrigan mused. What was the date? No matter. "April, whatever - in - Gawd's - name - the-day-was, 1847. It would look good on a tombstone, providing Mitchell had the courtesy to erect one."

He laughed and knew that his mouth filled with dirty water; he was too weary to care. Turning on his back, Carrigan waited while one of Mitchell's men—the posse was at the river by now—slid his long gun across a saddle. The ball gouted water a scant foot from Carrigan's head, then screamed like a banshee toward the Mexican shore. Instantly Carrigan went under; they would think him hit, for at the distance, the visibility was none too good. In addition, the rain that had threatened most of the day came downriver, driving fog ahead of it.

Carrigan swam feebly, knowing that he had lost both hat and gun in the water. His black hair plastered over his eyes, obscuring his vision. He could feel the grip of the water against his legs, knew that he was being carried far downriver. It would not be far to Matamoras, on the Mexico side, and, should he come ashore there, Carrigan would have exchanged five enemies for five-thousand—for it was common knowledge that General Ampudia's forces were gathered there, waiting to meet with Zachary Taylor.

Mexico claimed the land across the Rio Grande eastward to the Nueces; Texas refused to give it up. Battles had already been fought; more would be fought, and the sandy clay was red with mingled blood.

"Me," Carrigan reflected, even as he threw his strength against the river, "I'm right in the middle of it."

HE WAS growing weaker and the fact alarmed him; he had been without food since the night before, had had no sleep for two. Had he struggled thus far only to go down in defeat in the Rio?

From somewhere he heard a shout and, peering through the haze, saw Mitchell's big black race along the bank, heading toward him. Even at that distance, Carrigan could recognize Mitchell's squat frame in the saddle. Slowly, Carrigan allowed the water to flow over him, hoping he would not be struck by a drifting tree trunk. He held his breath until the fire shot before his eyes and his lungs ached. When he surfaced again, gasping, he saw that Mitchell had ridden too far—was now below him. Turning again, Carrigan threw the last of his strength in a battle to reach the Mexican shore.

"Senor!" The sound was a piercing whisper accompanied by the whistle of a reata that draped about Carrigan's shoulders. Instantly, there came a tug and Carrigan felt himself being towed toward the shallows. An old man, draped in a *serape*, stood in the mud of the Rio bank. "Madre, madre, madre," he said. "You are fortunate; there is quicksand below."

Carrigan felt the bottom strike his feet and the next instant was wading ashore. "Gracias," he said. "Muchos gracias."

"Nada," The old man had released the rope and was watching Carrigan shrewdly. "Many come across the river," he said, finally, "But none such as you. They are mainly *el medroso*, those who are afraid to fight; you are not of them?"

"I'm no deserter," Carrigan replied. "But I'm long on horse sense. There were five men after me; I didn't like the odds."

The old Mexican stood nodding and fondling the ears of a donkey that had come up beside him. "I have no part in this battle, either," he said. "My enemies are not across the Rio Grande. Come."

He turned and started up the slope, the donkey trailing behind. Carrigan, pausing only to pour the water from his boots, followed. Whoever the old peon was, he was evidently friendly; at least he had helped save Carrigan's life. Would he do that only to betray him? Carrigan thought not. And there might be a way for the old one to hide him, keep him in safety both from the Mexican military and Mitchell's men. After he had eaten, and slept, Carrigan felt that he might again be capable of handling his own affairs.

IT WAS raining harder now, and sheets of water sluiced down upon the top of Carrigan's bare head. But neither his guide nor the gray-bearded donkey seemed to mind; all the way to the edge of a low hill they walked not a step faster.

His head down, unseeing in the gathering night, Carrigan almost brained himself against the side of an adobe hut. When he looked up, cursing and rubbing his injured nose, he found that the old man had already entered. Even as he searched for the door, Carrigan saw the warm radiance of a tallow dip.

"I'm Mateo," the old man said simply, then swung his arm about the single room. There was a bright blanket hung against one wall, a low couch near the other. A crude, three-legged table held a drinking gourd and the sputtering light. "This is yours."

"Gracias," Carrigan said again and knew that the single word could never express his feelings. It was a humble place, clean for an old man's shanty, but it was warm and dry.

Mateo's eyes were like black beads as he heated grease in a shallow pan, cooked tortillas. Carrigan knew that Mateo was watching him, weighing him in his old Mexican mind. But, for what? "These vaqueros," Mateo said at last. "Why do they hunt you?"

Carrigan said, bluntly. "I killed a man. He needed killing; but he was a brother. So, they came after me."

"His name?"

"Grant Mitchell. It was his brother Travis who was on my trail; he's Sheriff."

Mateo digested the information silently, intent upon the cooking food. Then, he asked, "Why did you kill this man?"

"I said he needed it." Carrigan's voice was growing hot.

"You are *Dios* that you know who must die?" Mateo's reply was calm.

Carrigan stood up, paced about the low-ceilinged room "He was beating a boy," he told Mateo finally; "a boy only about nine years old. That's the kind of a man Grant Mitchell was. I argued with him; when he went for his gun, I shot him."

"So?" Carrigan was amazed to find amusement in Mateo's dark eyes. The old man came across the room, one hand outstretched in mute appeal. "I tell you now why I brought you to this place," he said. "I think you are a just man." Abruptly, he lapsed again into Spanish and Carrigan shook his head slowly.

"No habler," he objected, *"rapid-amente."*

As crude as his use of the language was, Mateo understood and went on more slowly, interspersing an English word at intervals.

"It is a common story," he began. "Many of us in this country have no sympathy for the men who would fight this war. Therefore we are left behind. However," his expression changed, "we are not out of the danger; behind, and with an army, come men who are as wolves. Anything of value one might have..." Mateo spread his hands expressively. "We are preyed upon by both friend and foe alike. It is sad."

CARRIGAN grunted. "You're no worse off than I am," he objected. "If I go back, Mitchell's men

will shoot me on sight; if I stay here, Ampudia's military will eventually stand me against a wall for a spy. I am also between the devil and a witch."

"Es verdad." Mateo's expression was grim. His face in the wan light seemed older, as wise as a serpent's. "But there are places where you could be safe."

"Where?"

"Up the Rio Grande. If you could reach Ciudad Juarez and cross the river there..."

"If I could reach the moon," Carrigan retorted. "The Rio Grande is crawling alive with soldiers; I wouldn't have a chance."

Mateo shook his head. "As *Americano*, no; we would have to change your appearance." He paused, musing. "You are deeply tanned. Indeed, almost as I am. Your hair is dark. True, you are too tall. But a straw sombrero and a *serape* will hide those broad shoulders. You speak our language well enough; if necessary, you could be a mute, travelling toward safety. Then, Teresa could talk for you."

"And," Carrigan asked in growing alarm, "who is Teresa? Look I'm not taking care of a kid, even for you. I owe you a lot, I'll admit it. I have some money and I'll pay you. From then on I'll take care of myself..."

His voice trailed off as he saw tears on Mateo's cheeks. "I hoped... she is the only thing I have of value that the men might want. I wished to see her safe, if it cost me my life. For that reason I told you these things."

"I'll not repeat them," Carrigan said, gruffly. "She's still safe with you."

"No, *Senor*. You do not know. They will come here for me and they will tear this place to the ground looking for her. She must go to your country." Mateo raised his voice and the blanket hanging against the wall shook convulsively. "Teresa! You may come out; it is a friend."

Carrigan expected a child. His eyes were fixed on a level a couple of feet from the floor. For that reason he was astounded to see, not a child's head but a woman's well-rounded thighs.

"This," Mateo said proudly, "is my grand-daughter, Teresa."

"Yes," Carrigan replied weakly. "I see her."

Black hair, as black as Carrigan's, hanging in waves over her shoulders. The flash of brown eyes and of white teeth in an olive face. Slim shoulders beneath the lace mantilla...

"You will take her with you, *Senor?*"

"But...but," Carrigan wet his lips. "But, how? Do you think these men are blind?"

"She will be dressed as a boy," Mateo explained. "The hair we will cut off. Old pantaloons. A ragged serape, one of mine. She will be your nephew, perhaps, helping her old, mute uncle to a place of safety. Please, Senor. If you would kill a man for beating a young boy, what would you do to the beast that molested such as this? Take her with you to Ciudad Juarez."

Teresa was waiting quietly, her eyes fast upon Carrigan's. He was loathe to meet her gaze, looked instead at Mateo. "I'll try," he said. "I'll do my best."

2

CARRIGAN lay behind a screen of mesquite on a bluff that overlooked the river. Before him the land dropped into a series of mud flats that extended northward as far as he could see. Behind him, in the shade of a gnarled tree, Teresa sat.

Carrigan was forced to admit that she made an altogether believable boy. Her long hair had been cropped and she wore the faded pantaloons and linsey shirt of a peon. Had it not been for the disturbing lights in her black eyes and a natural coquettishness, Carrigan would have been able to think of her as a boy.

As it was...he shook his head and went back to watching the river. They were three days from Matamoras, three hard days; Carrigan walking most of the time; Teresa

riding the decrepit donkey. Mateo had remained behind on the assumption that, alone, the military would not molest him. Then, it was as he had said, the old did not transplant easily.

Below Carrigan, steel clicked on rock; instantly Carrigan was all attention. He was scouting the way before him merely as a matter of routine. They were still in enemy country, would be for days, and some of the Mexican Army, rallying to Ampudia's call, might easily be working southward along the Rio Grande.

Nothing moved. Carrigan removed his straw sombrero and leaned farther through the underbrush, looking into the shallow defile below him. A hundred yards away a crow cawed and ascended from a tree tip, beating his wings in the still sunlight. Then Carrigan saw.

The click had been the kiss of a rifle butt against a rock. In the grove below, soldiers were grouped; there was no movement, no sound.

Carrigan felt a movement near him and saw Teresa leave the safety of her tree and slip toward him. With one hand he motioned her back. He saw then that she was not watching him. Her head was turned and her eyes upon something downriver beyond his field of view. Rather than move and expose himself to the sight of the armed men below, Carrigan waited for her.

"Senor," Her voice was a thin whisper that reached his ears only. "*Vaqueros,* down the river. Six."

Carrigan jerked his thumb toward the defile below. *"Soldados,"* he said. "Be still."

She subsided, pouting a little as he began worming his way through the high grass toward a slight knoll. She had the good sense to remain behind him, motionless in the mesquite.

Carrigan had laid his sombrero aside and, as he thrust his bare head over the brim of the hill, there was a shout below. Startled, he hugged the ground, waiting for the sound of a rifle and the keening of a ball. Certainly, he had been seen.

There was another long silence, then voices were raised. A quick look told Carrigan that a group of riders had joined the fighters under the trees; puzzled, he slid over the tip of the knoll, to a point almost over the encampment.

White men below. Riders from across the Rio talking to the Mexicans. Carrigan waited, holding his breath in his throat. It was common knowledge that Taylor and his forces expected to meet with Mexican Cavalry somewhere in the vicinity of Matamoras. Why then were these soldiers of Ampudia so far upriver? And, what were Americans doing here?

The men who had crossed the Rio were no longer where he could see them but they had left their horses ground-hitched in the open. There was one, a black gelding, that caused Carrigan to watch and wonder. Not too long ago, he had seen a horse very much like that one. Probably there were plenty of midnight geldings along the river.

THE HORSE switched at a gadfly and turned, throwing his flank into the sunlight. Carrigan drew back, throwing caution to the wind. The gelding was branded, Bar-M. The Mitchell brand. And, here on the enemy side of the Rio!

"We are in trouble?" It was Teresa and Carrigan started. He had quite forgotten her. "Yes," he replied. "No."

She laughed, quietly.

He said, "Shut up."

Teresa subsided, watching him with hurt eyes and he was immediately sorry. "I killed a man," he told her slowly, "on the American side. That's what I'm doing here. He needed shooting if ever a man did but his brother is the sheriff. Besides that, the whole outfit he owns was after me. I did the best thing I could and slipped across the river. Maybe you don't understand all this, Teresa; maybe I don't understand it myself. I guess I did the wrong thing. In the first place, maybe, I had nothing to run for..."

She nodded brightly, her eyes

fastened upon his face. "We will go on now, *Senor?*"

"No, Teresa."

"Porque?"

"Look," Carrigan took a stick and drew lines in the sand.

"These are Ampudia's men, the soldados. Understand? Here...this line. And," quick strokes of the twig. "Here is the Rio Grande. The Americanos will come from this direction and their reconnaisance will scout the river on the United States side."

He fell silent, thinking. "So," he said, finally, half to himself. "That's what will happen."

He retrieved his sombrero and began his slow way back to the safety of the low ground. Standing, finally, near the donkey, he motioned Teresa to mount. "We're not going on," he told her bluntly; "we're heading back. I have to go to Matamoras."

Teresa remained silent until they were a mile away from the encampment, then: "They will kill me in Matamoras," she said, sadly. "But they will kill me too late. *Senor*... is it so important?"

Carrigan stopped and faced her. "Don't make it any harder for me," he said. "I'll do my best to take care of you. But, I've made one mistake; I let myself be run out of the United States. Another mistake won't correct that. Don't ask me to be a coward, Teresa."

She waited until he was again walking ahead of her before she made her reply. "I am a woman grown, *Senor*. Not in years, perhaps, as you count them. But, we of Mexico mature quickly; I would ask nothing of my man..."

Carrigan walked swiftly to hide the mantle of red that bathed his ears.

●

IT WAS plain that Ampudia was setting a trap for Taylor's fighting men by leaving a large force of cavalry to cross the Rio in Taylor's rear. It was also evident to Carrigan that Mitchell, and the men who rode with him, were involved in the plot. But for what possible gain? What could Ampudia give Mitchell that the man did not already have? Whatever it was, it was of enough value to Mitchell that he would betray his country for it.

It started to rain again and Carrigan, plodding ahead of the donkey, was soon soaked to the skin. He felt admiration for Teresa; she must, indeed, be as wet and uncomfortable as he was yet she did not complain. Once, stiff and sore, she had led the donkey and walked while Carrigan scouted ahead. They were not far from Matamoras, closer still to Mateo's hut, and there might be enemy military anywhere.

As for Carrigan, he knew that he must leave Teresa with Mateo. She would be in danger there, but in greater danger in Matamoras. And, after Carrigan had completed his self-imposed errand, what then? Would there still be time for the two of them to reach Ciudad Juarez? Carrigan knew that the attempt would be hopeless.

After all, he reasoned, which came first—his duty to a girl he had only known for days. The grand-daughter of an illiterate woodchopper? Or to his own country? He had never thought of the matter before and when he thought of the ease with which Mitchell had driven him from his own country, he was wretched.

He was no coward, was Carrigan, but he had no sympathy for the hopeless fight; if the odds were too high a man could run and live or stay and die. What profit was there in death?

Carrigan thought he, at last, had the answer. It depended entirely in the manner of a man's dying... "Teresa," he said.

"Si."

"You don't blame me? Maybe you can't understand why I'm going back..."

He heard the quick intake of her breath but kept his head resolutely turned away. A droplet of water coursed down his cheek, leaving a lighter path in the grime. His shoulders were cold at the touch of his wet serape.

"I do. There are some things, *Senor,* that are greater than we. The people of Mexico know that. Our soil has been red with blood for generations. *Senor,* we say this: First there is the man himself, then there is his kin. His country is next and he will fight for it, too. But above these things, sometimes, there is *sueno,* his dream."

"I'll...I'll come back for you, Teresa; I promise that." Carrigan swallowed but the lump refused to go down. He damned himself for being a fool. Here was this...this child. A child of another people. How old was she? Seventeen? Perhaps eighteen? He fought against what he imagined to be sentimentality.

"We're almost there," he said. "Watch out for Mateo."

EVEN BEFORE they reached the the hut, Carrigan knew that something was wrong. The tiny building was no more; where Mateo's home had stood, there was but a pile of rubbish.

"Abuelo!" Teresa's voice was a thin whimper as she stumbled to the ruins, looking for some sign of the old man. Seeing none, she sank upon a stone and, rather than weep, stared blankly at the rain-shrouded hills.

Carrigan waited awkwardly nearby. There was nothing he could do, or say; the picture was plain. Guerillas had been here. Ampudia's men would never have stooped so low against one of their own countrymen. No, in the wanton waste of war, there were bred men of no color, a ghostly procession of human vampires that sucked the blood of the land. Coming, looking for Teresa, perhaps, they had vented their anger on an old man and his home...

For the second time in as many hours, Carrigan fought against the lump that rose in his throat. But, this time, there came also the red haze of anger.

"Come," he said to Teresa. "We're going on."

"To where?"

He grunted, picking up the donkey's lead rope. "Matamoras. Mateo may be there. I can hide you someplace while I look for him; at the same time I can settle a score of my own..."

3

THE CLUSTER of shacks stood like miserable children, huddled against the rain. Carrigan led the donkey to the shelter of a tree and stood, looking into the gathering darkness. Teresa, silent on the beast, watched him. Carrigan knew that she depended utterly upon him and while the idea caused him some pride—no one had so relied upon him before—he was also filled with grave concern.

Where, under the very noses of Ampudia's men, could he hide this girl? Girl...! Carrigan paused. There was the answer. She was dressed as a boy; could he carry the idea even further?

"Wait here," he told her curtly. "If you hear someone coming, hide. But stay where you can see this spot. I'll be back."

Before she could voice her protest, he was gone.

There was a narrow alleyway ahead, the buildings leaning over it, and into this Carrigan ducked. There had been no sound as he had crossed the open space outside the town, no voice raised in challenge. That was good; probably Ampudia's men were out of the wet, huddled about the smoking fires.

Carrigan waited under the wide eave of a hut until he could scout the street thoroughly before he ventured a crossing. Again there was no alarm and Carrigan breathed easier; he would find what he sought near the center of the town, near the church. There would certainly be a guard posted somewhere. A soldier, slight of figure, and alone.

A ladder-ribbed dog trotted from an adjoining alley and came close to smell of Carrigan's boots. Satisfied that Carrigan was a friend, he sat down and woofed expectantly. "Get!" Carrigan waved his hand. "Vamose!"

The dog regarded him disgustedly

and continued on his way down the street. Carrigan slouched toward the spire of the church, trying to look as indolent as possible. He fought the desire to move quickly. Even in this rain, no Mexican would run; once wet to the skin, a man can get no wetter.

There was the square just ahead, and the double doors of the church. Across was a tiny adobe building that probably served as the city hall. And, there was the guard. Carrigan breathed his satisfaction; the man was small, small enough, and he was alone. He stood under the projecting eave of a building and rolled a cigarette from a husk of corn.

He was totally unaware of Carrigan's approach, bending his head over his task. From the mud of the street, Carrigan picked up a round rock the size of his doubled fist. Holding it in a fold of his serape, he walked closer. The soldier looked up.

"Alto..." he began. It was the last word he would utter on this side of the Styx; Carrigan's rock caught him squarely between the eyes.

Carrigan bent over him and, grasping the soldier by the arms, dragged him to the darkness beside the church. Across the square, the yellow lights from tallow dips bit into the new night. As Carrigan stooped beside the man, the guard's breathing stopped.

TERESA was waiting, still in the doubtful protection of the dripping tree. As Carrigan came back, in pitch blackness, he almost fell over her. She had left the donkey and was perched on a rock, her legs crossed under her.

"Gracias," she exclaimed. "Dios..."

Carrigan chuckled. "I said I'd be back. And, with new clothes for you. Here."

"But, how...?"

"It's dark; no one can see. You can dress beneath my serape."

"No." He heard her quickened breathing and the sound of her wet garments as she slipped them off. As she reached for the bundle he held, her bare arm touched his and Carrigan withdrew as if he had been bitten. It might have been his imagination, there in the darkness. Or, it could have been true. But, why would Teresa laugh?

"You'll have to remember," he told her. "Lower your voice. And, if anyone asks you, you're guarding the road; remember that. And, wait for me."

"Si."

Teresa was close to him, still struggling with the unfamiliar buttons on the uniform.

"Wait, Senor."

Carrigan paused, his weight on one foot. Why didn't she hurry? The night would be gone and his job in Matamoras still undone...

There was the touch of something light and soft against his lips; her fingers seeking his face. Then her slim arms crept around his neck and her lips were pressed to his. In the next instant, Carrigan was gone and she was left alone on the road to the town.

There was no sign of life in the square; evidently the dead guard had not been discovered. However, Carrigan knew that the alarm could be sounded at any moment. He wished he knew when the guard was changed; when another soldier would come to relieve his departed comrade. Carrigan shrugged away the thought. There was no use worrying about how to cross that bridge until he reached it.

By the amount of light that came from the city building, Carrigan surmised that Ampudia, or his representative, had taken over the *alcalde's* office as his headquarters. It was but a few steps from the darkness to a vantage point beneath the windows; there, Carrigan waited.

Low voices inside. Holding his sombrero in his hand, Carrigan raised his head. Inside, on a wide table, tallow dips were guttering. There were three men in the room, one of them an extremely fat officer who bent over a sheaf of maps. By the grade and color of his uniform, Carrigan surmised that here

was one of Ampudia's high-ranking officers. Possibly, Ampudia himself.

There was one other Mexican officer in the room but it was the third man who caused Carrigan to purse his lips in a soundless whistle. Travis Mitchell sat easily in a hickory chair, his feet upon the table and a long *cigarro* between his lips.

It was true, then; the burly Mitchell was involved in some deal with Ampudia. He had contacted the cavalry Carrigan had spotted beside the river, then Mitchell had ridden directly to Ampudia himself. Carrigan ducked his head, trying to hear the words that were being spoken. No use; in the first place, his knowledge of Spanish was faulty and excepting Mitchell, they kept their voices to a low pitch.

Carrigan stood in the rain and waited.

The dog came back. Maybe it was another dog; these dogs all looked pretty much alike. This one looked at Carrigan and whined plaintively. Carrigan pushed the animal away, trying to discourage its friendly overtures. The dog merely licked at his hand and came back. *Oh, damn!* Carrigan thought. *If you bark now...*

He felt the trickle of sweat start betwen his shoulder blades, mingle with the rain, and start toward his hips. If the dog barked, Carrigan would die in the mud of Mexico. And, worst of all, he would die thoroughly miserable. Carrigan moved and something shifted beneath his foot; stooping, Carrigan felt for the stick and, hoping that dogs were the same the world over, cast it into the darkness.

The cur was immediately gone, chasing after the bit of wood. Mentally blessing the Mexican children who had taught the animal to play, Carrigan looked again into the lighted room.

THREE THINGS happened at once. Two soldiers bustled into the room, dragging another man between them. An old man. Mateo! Mitchell was on his feet, one hand catching Mateo across the face. And, the dog was back.

Cursing inaudibly, Carrigan felt for the stick, took it from the waiting jaws, and threw it again. *This could go on all night* he thought. *Unless the mutt loses the stick.*

Mitchell, after striking Mateo, waited while one of the soldiers fired a long string of Spanish. Once, Carrigan heard the word *"Americano"* but missed the meaning of the rest of the sentence.

"He says he knows nothing," the soldier interpreted.

"He's a liar." Mitchell raised his hand as if to strike again and Mateo shrank away against the restraining hands of his guards.

Belatedly, the meaning of the scene began to penetrate Carrigan's mind. By some means, Mitchell had found Mateo and had caused him to be brought to Matamoras for questioning. And, the reason was plain; whatever else Mitchell might want, whatever the reason for his dealing with Ampudia's men, the Bar-M owner wanted Carrigan worse. For that reason, Mitchell would not cause any permanent harm to befall the old woodcutter until he, Carrigan, was captured.

Smiling thinly, Carrigan edged away from the window and sought the front of the building. There was a door at street level, overhung by a tottery wooden awning; two spindly posts set upon stones supported the entire structure.

Wriggling out of his tattered serape, Carrigan placed a tentative hand upon the post. It was old, rotten, but might support his weight. Cautiously he wrapped his long legs about it and started the slow ascent toward the wooden awning. It seemed that the whole front of the building protested audibly and Carrigan froze in his position half way up the post and waited.

The low hum of voices from within continued. Once there was a low cry of pain. Mitchell had not as yet wrung any information from Mateo. Nor, was it likely he would; Mateo would be thinking first of Teresa and to betray Carrigan would be to deliver his grand-daughter into the hands of Ampudia's men.

The thought of Teresa gave Carrigan pause. Was she safe? Certainly she was lonely, wet and afraid out in the darkness of the deserted road. Carrigan hoped, fervently, that she would not take the sudden notion to come after him.

He gained another two feet and found the edge of the porch roof under his fingers. As he reached, part of the rain-soaked wood crumbled under his fingers and fell to the ground. There was the patter of feet and the dog was back. Although Carrigan could not see the animal in the dark, he knew that the brute was just below. And, further, should Carrigan not continue the game he had been playing, the dog might well bark.

THERE WAS the sensation of sudden cold between Carrigan's shoulder blades as his groping fingers sought something, anything that he might throw.

Carrigan knew that his time was fast running out. In the first place, daylight would find Teresa in great danger. He had to be back to her before it was time for the town to be stirring. Then, Ampudia's rear guard were fast getting a trap laid for Zachary Taylor's cavalry. Some way, Carrigan must get the word across the river in time to warn some element of the American Army.

And, to render the problem more acute, Mateo must be released. For Mitchell, as soon as he saw that there was no information forthcoming from the old man, would certainly see that Mateo was killed.

Carrigan's fingers were chilled and his legs ached with the strain. The dog had not barked as yet; there should be something, anything...

There was a loose bit of wood at the edge of the awning and Carrigan frantically worked it loose. Then, turning, he threw with all his might across the street. There was the thud of the dog's pads and the splash of water and Carrigan took his first real breath for what seemed hours.

Hooking an elbow at the top of the wooden ledge, Carrigan swung his legs free and in one wriggle, was on his stomach, his head hanging over the street. He was barely in time. Even as he regained his breath, a shaft of yellow from the tallow dips crossed the street. The door beneath him was opening.

Though two men had brought Mateo to the hall, only one *soldado* came out with him. Evidently the guard's companion had remained behind for further orders. *That,* Carrigan thought exultantly, *simplifies the problem.*

HUNCHING his shoulders like a great cat, Carrigan waited until Mateo and his guard were directly underneath and the door closed behind them. Scrambling erect, he dropped. The dumbfounded guard had not even the time to open his mouth; Carrigan's boots struck him in the center of the top of his head and he went down like a pole-axed steer. Fighting wildly, Carrigan got his feet under him and, standing astride of the unconscious guard, felt for the man's gun.

"Mateo," he whispered. "It's Carrigan; be still."

"Si." Old the man might be, but his wits were in good working order. Even as Carrigan identified himself, Mateo's long fingers were about the guard's lax throat, waiting for any sign of returning consciousness.

Carrigan felt the hard, cold butt of a gun thrust in the waistband of the guard's pantaloons and, even as his hooked fingers tugged at it something happened that undid all he had done. The dog, unable to find the stick, was back barking and frisking at Carrigan's feet.

Instantly the door swung open and Carrigan felt rather than saw the yellow glow bathe his back. He turned, his feet sliding in the mud, the gun in his outstretched hand. But he was seconds too late. Mitchell was in the open doorway, his hulk black against the light; and, even as Carrigan fought for position, Mitchell fired.

4

"SENOR! *Senor* Carrigan." It was Mateo's voice and Carrigan knew that he should awaken. There was something he had to do, but he had forgotten what it was. And, this dark sleep was so good. When he tried to open his eyes the hammers came again into his skull and it was dark anyway, so why try? Sighing, Carrigan turned on his side and relaxed.

"Senor... There is gray light in the east."

Carrigan sat up and held his hands to his head. "What difference does it make?" he queried dumbly.

He could see Mateo's face, hanging like a pale blob in the gloom. "You did not hear, Senor," Mateo told him agreeably. "We are to be shot at dawn."

"Why?...Wh..." Carrigan struggled to his knees, fighting the nausea that swept over him. Teresa! She was out there, alone— Still waiting for him. By daylight she, too, would be captured. Carrigan shuddered and buried his face in his hands.

"You are a spy," Mateo went on imperturbedly. "For that, you are to be shot. They are shooting me, as the *gringo* said: 'just for the hell of it.'"

Carrigan groaned; he could remember now. The knocking out of the guard in the dark street. The attempt to liberate Mateo. The dog. Damn the dog! Mitchell, hulking like a beast in the open doorway. The orange fire and the pain. Carrigan felt of the welt upon his head and was thankful. A half-inch lower...

"Where are we?" he asked.

"In the *carcel,* the jail; it is an ideal place," Mateo responded.

Yes, Carrigan reflected. *Ideal for whom?*

He managed to get himself erect; walking slowly, his hand braced against the wall, Carrigan made a circuit of the room.

"It is useless, Senor," Mateo told him. "I have been over it like a mouse seeking a hole. There is nothing but a stout oaken door and a tiny window. We can but wait."

Carrigan sat down again, aware that his wet clothing had dried somewhat and that he was enormously hungry. What matter? In an hour he would no longer feel his empty stomach.

"Teresa," Mateo asked. "She is safe?"

No use telling the truth, Carrigan thought wearily. Let Mateo die in peace. "She is safe," he said.

"*Bueno,* I had faith in you."

Faith! Carrigan's thoughts were bitter. It would have been better to have seen to Teresa, to have left Mateo and Taylor's army to their respective fates. Or, would it? Was it not better to die knowing that one had done one's best? *Small comfort,* Carrigan reflected, *when you died either way.*

His head came erect. There were footsteps on the wooden floor of the corridor outside. Mateo moved quickly, his hand going beneath his *serape. "Senor!* Here!"

It was the gun—the gun that Carrigan had been trying to bring into line when Mitchell had discovered and shot him. Mateo, acting swiftly, had managed to secrete it and, in the urgency of the moment, neither Mitchell nor his friends had thought to look for it.

The coolness of the cedar butt was good to Carrigan's hand. A quick glance told him that it was loaded, the cap in place. One shot; he had to make it good.

THE FOOTSTEPS stopped outside and there was a long moment of silence. Then, slowly, the heavy bolt of the door was drawn back. Carrigan waited, fighting against his impatience, the gun hidden beneath his leg. Even then a shaft of gold shot through the narrow *carcel* window as the sun looked through the clouds. It was open daylight.

A small hand came around the edge of the door and a slim figure, dressed in the uniform of a Mexican soldier, slipped into the room. "Teresa!" Carrigan was on his feet, his weakness forgotten, as he felt

the warmth of her form melt into his arms.

"I waited..." she said, against the pressure of his lips... "I thought something must have happened. So, I looked...this place was last..."

Carrigan released her and stepped back to look at her face. The incredibility of it all! This girl, scarcely a woman, wandering through the darkness of an enemy town, seeking the man she loved. Carrigan felt his heart warm to her even as his ears heard another sound; this time, the footsteps on the corridor floor were heavier.

Carrigan was at the door, his feet making no sound. Cautiously, he thrust his head through the crack. No one there. Whoever was coming had not as yet made the turn that led from the entry to the cell hall proper.

"Here!" He beckoned and Teresa and Mateo were at his side. "Quickly. Down this way..."

Hoping that Mexican jails had back doors, Carrigan led the way down the corridor. They passed another cell, then a bend in the hall, and Carrigan breathed easier. Now anyone coming from the front of the *carcel* would be unable to see them. It would be upon discovery of the empty cell that the alarm would be raised. That gave them seconds; precious seconds.

There was a small room at the end of the corridor and, across the room, a door. Leading Carrigan fumbled with the latch, swung the door open. In back of the jail, there was a copse of trees and, in the distance, the sparkling waters of the Rio Grande.

"Run," Carrigan said. "For the river. I'll be right behind."

Teresa paused only long enough to kiss him on the mouth; then she and Mateo were gone, stumbling through the underbrush that ringed Matamoras. Carrigan stood, waiting.

Even as he took his second breath, a cry sounded from the jail building and heavy footsteps sounded upon the wooden floor. Then, the back door burst open and a familiar form stood there, his back to the early sunlight; it was Mitchell.

"Carrigan!" Travis Mitchell's voice rose in a hoarse shout and he took lumbering steps away from the *carcel* and toward the edge of the wood. In the shelter of the cottonwoods, Carrigan waited. Mitchell's hands were empty as he came, but Carrigan knew that the huge man could fill them quickly, that he had guns thrust behind the waistband of his breeches.

ODDLY, there was no one behind Mitchell. The man came, either to kill or be killed, and he came without support. Carrigan felt a surge of admiration for his enemy; here was a big man and one whom would have someday grown bigger. As it was, the Bar-M was Mitchell's, and the prestige of being sheriff. Carrigan caught himself. A corrupt sheriff, head of a corrupt combine in a dirty county. A man who would see his country's interests in hell for personal gain. For, it was evident that Mitchell wanted land from the enemy; probably Ampudia had agreed to give Mitchell an empire in return for Mitchell's aid.

Either that, or Mitchell was hoping that such an offer would be made...

"Carrigan!" Mitchell shouted again. He was close, only a hundred feet away. Carrigan backed slowly into the underbrush, his hand near the butt of his gun. Where were Teresa and Mateo? By now they should be in the comparative safety of the Rio Grande.

What would life be like for Teresa without Carrigan?

"I'm not going to die," Carrigan said, loudly, and his hooked hand was a blur of motion. Mitchell moved at the same instant, his hands dipping in the crossing draw. Gunfire thundered.

Carrigan went down, mulekicked by a slug in the shoulder. His gun fired, Carrigan waited, resting his weight upon one knee. He was conscious of the sunlight, knew that the rain clouds had blown away from Matamoras.

Then, as he watched, Mitchell shambled to a halt, moving like an ungainly bear. The man had dropped

his guns and had his hands clutched to his chest. He was on his knees, teetering like a falling tree. He fought, trying to stem the blood that poured from the gaping hole in his chest. Carrigan's slug had struck the star, the star that the scheming Mitchell had worn so profitably as sheriff and had pushed it back through the wall of the man's lungs.

"I can't...I..." Mitchell said and he gazed awestruck at his dripping hands. "Land...land! Acres of it, all for me..."

He died.

Carrigan ran blindly through the undergrowth that overlooked the Rio, not knowing when he reached the edge of the river, not knowing that Mateo and Teresa waited there for him.

HE WAS safe. Carrigan bathed in the luxury of that safety and watched Teresa exchange raillery with the rough men of the 9th Cavalry. Mateo hunkered nearby, washing his old back in the Texas sunshine.

"They're on their way," Captain Grimes strode up, his figure slim in blue coat and deeper blue breeches. "General Taylor will know of the trap in time to avoid it."

Carrigan grinned, conscious that Teresa had left the cooking fire and was running toward him. "Any chance," Carrigan asked, "of a man getting on in your outfit? Y'see, I've been thinking..."

"Later, man," Grimes replied. "You've done a good day's work now. Later. Besides, you're wounded; give yourself time to heal." Grimes smiled faintly. "I'm not one to abrogate the authority of the Congress but I think, perhaps, there could be a commission."

"I'll be back," Carrigan promised. "After a time." Teresa was with him and Grimes turned to go. Carrigan added, "when this shoulder heals and there's been a short honeymoon."

Mateo stirred, almost asleep in the sunshine. He was old and the heat helped his bones. "All honeymoons are short," he said; "I am an old man and I know."

But Carrigan did not hear. Looking into Teresa's laughing face, he could only see the bright path that lay ahead. A smooth path, wide enough for two, that wound its way through the fields of peace.

●

Yuh Don't Need a Lantern
to see that there are
10 Complete New Stories
featuring
BULLETS FOR A FAKER
by T. W. Ford
WELCOME HOME TO HELL
by W. Edmunds Claussen

in the October issue of

FAMOUS WESTERN

Ma Preston wouldn't stand for foul language in her place—as tough gents found out rather suddenly.

True Fact Feature

BOOM-TOWN TAMER

by Cliff Campbell

HER TWO French nieces in Paris, France, where Mrs. Tom Preston was visiting, never suspected that their elderly, white-haired, gentle-hearted "Auntie" was the notoriously famous "Ma" Preston, gambling, saloon-keeping, gun-toting, pipe-smoking, boot-wearing "Boss" of one of the toughest early West mining-camps in California's "boom-town" history.

"Ma" took that secret with her to the grave. A cablegram delivered to "Ma" in Paris broke her heart, and a few months later, she died and was buried in France, thousands of miles from the scene of her sensational exploits.

In the 1880's, the gold-rush town of Calico, in the California Desert, was running "wide-open an' hell-bent," one of the most lawless min-

ing towns west of the Rockies. Gun and knife killings were commonplace occurences. Saloons, gambling-joints, honky-tonks, dance-halls ran day and night, with no semblance of law, order or decency. Gold flowed into tills, and poor prospectors "m u s h r o o m e d" into millionaires overnight.

Then came Margaret, the ex-Paris playgirl, to make her debut in the cash-crazy, c a v o r t i n' boom-town. With her advent, the history of Calico, California, was in the making!

Margaret emigrated from France to New York, then westward, in the Spring of 1880. She was a buxom, black-eyed, rosy-cheeked quick-witted, quick-tempered spitfire. Any boom-town rough-neck or "Beau Brummel" who insulted her got a fist-smash in the face that quelled him.

"Tommy" Preston, owner of Calico's leading saloon, dance-hall and hotel, hired Margaret to entertain in his rough-and-rowdy resort. The minute her shrewd, sparkling black eyes focused on Tom with disapproving appraisal, he was a "gone goose." He had been on a riotous binge the night before and was suffering from a mean hangover. "You drink too much; you are your own best customer!" snapped Margie. "If I work for you in your dance-hall, you must sober up!"

Tom had met his mistress—and master.

A few months later, he and Margie were married. The town went on a celebratin' jamboree at Tom's expense, and Tom got well soused. Thereupon, Margie fired her boozy bridegroom out from behind his bar, shunted him into a hotel bed, locked him in the room, and took charge of the saloon, dance-hall and gambling-parlor..

From that day on, Tom was an unwelcome visitor in his own barroom. If Margie caught him swiping a bottle of hooch, she forced him to clean hotel-rooms, work in the kitchen, scrub floors, and sleep in the barn hayloft. Tom gradually began to realize that it was easier to keep sober than be the victim of a tyrannical slave-driver in skirts.

Margie's "bossing" quickly began to extend to the boom-town populace. She informed her saloon-customers and Calico citizens that she was going to have a baby, and there must be less gunfire, rowdyism and hell-raisin' in town. The mining-camp quieted down somewhat, and soon after she presented Tom with a baby daughter. Then Calico really cut loose, stagin' a two-day hell-roarin' jamboree to celebrate the event!

A COUPLE of weeks later, the baby girl died, and Calico went into mourning and wept with Margie and Tom, who were utterly heart-broken. After the funeral, Tom began calling Margie "Ma"—and that's how the Southwest's most notoriously spectacular boom-town dance-hall gal, saloon-keeper and gambler came by her nickname, "Ma" Preston.

After the death of her baby, Margie's personality underwent a queer psychological change. She gradually grew rougher in manner, quit wearing pretty feminine clothes, learned to smoke a pipe, and would swear like a muleskinner when angry. For many years her dress usually consisted of a battered straw hat, a calico wrapper, an ankle-length duster, and rough cowhide boots.

At times during these years, she really got *tough!*

"Ma" ruled her saloon, dance-hall, gambling-parlor with an iron hand. When patrons got to raising too much hell, she beat them up with her fists, and threw them out of the joint. She got to be lightnin'-on-the-draw with a gun, and sometimes wounded a badman or bully, but never shot to kill. After pluggin' a customer, she would often bind up the wound or wounds inflicted, and give the victim a profane bawlin'-out for his misbehavior. When aggravated, Ma's tongue-lashings were as much feared as her sixgun.

When she fist-pounded a customer and threw him out, only an abject apology and promise to be good in future would restore him as a saloon

or dance-hall patron. If he got tough again, "Ma" tore into him like a tigress, tossed him into the street, and he stayed out for keeps. Tom Preston was never allowed to participate in a brawl, or even set foot in the saloon, except to sweep and clean up. On occasions he would swipe a bottle from the bar stock, fall off the wagon, and catch hell from "Ma" for his delinquency.

"Ma" not only "bossed" her hubby, but Calico, as well. There was no judge, lawyer, sheriff, preacher or doctor in town—so "Ma" assumed the duties of all five. She passed judgment on fights, thievings, lawlessness. She often served as doctor and nurse to sick citizens; would even go into the desert, bucking sandstorms and heat, to administer to a bedridden prospector, or serve as midwife to a child-bearing woman. She preached funeral services at gravesides, and helped bury the dead. She bound up wounds and set broken limbs. She "staked" dozens of down-and-out prospectors. Many of these, who later struck it rich, were indebted to "Ma" for tiding them along until they uncovered pay-dirt.

IN ADDITION to her multitudenous civic duties, "Ma" served drinks at her bar, gambled with customers, and lost and won small fortunes. At times, she seemed the epitome of hard-boiled unrighteousness—again a saint in disguise. Under her iron rule, Calico had quieted down to comparative decency, had ceased being a lawless, godless town. Weeks passed without killings and blood-letting orgies. The streets had become safe for law-abiding citizens.

When the Calico "boom" petered out, and the camp became a ghost-town, "Ma" and "Pa" Preston opened a hotel in northern California, and settled down to a quieter life. Years later, in the early days of World War 1, "Ma" sold hundreds of "Victory Bonds" to desert citizens. Being French, she longed to return to the land she had left in early girlhood, and do her bit to aid wounded soldiers in the homeland of her birth. Bidding her aged husband, Tom, a tender goodbye, she boarded a train for New York; then a steamship for France.

In Paris, "Ma" searched for long-neglected kinfolks, and finally located two nieces, who were delighted at the homecoming of "Auntie Margaret," whom they had heard spoken of but had never known.

"Ma" had hardly settled down for a pleasant visit with her newly-discovered relatives, when she received word from the California Desert that Tom Preston had suddenly passed away with a heart attack.

The shock sent "Ma" to her bed in her nieces' home, and she died not long afterward. When her beloved Tom went to his grave, thousands of miles away, he took Ma's grieving heart with him.

"Ma" never told her French nieces that her small fortune, which she willed to them, had been gleaned from a saloon, dance-hall, gambling-joint, in a riotous California gold-rush town that she had *tamed* and bossed as a gun-toting, fist-fighting, pipe-smoking, swearing female in an old straw hat, calico dress, linen duster, and men's rawhide boots. Dying in France of a broken heart, she took that secret with her to a grave in a Paris cemetery.

A Heart-Warming Novelet
GIRL OF REDSTONE BASIN by Ben Frank
is but one of the many fine stories in
REAL WESTERN ROMANCES

He Bet On Wild Bill's Gun

by Wayne D. Mote

THERE WERE plenty of betting men, with plenty of betting money, in the Black Hills country around Deadwood, South Dakota, in the old days. But there was one drawback: not much of anything to bet on—that is, except for the all night poker games and Sunday horse races. Hot-blooded gambling men pretty soon got tired of these pastimes and wanted something more exciting to risk their money on.

So they turned to betting on human life.

Whenever two local gun-packers decided it was time to see which was the best man, gamblers would start putting down bets and handing over stacks of gold-pieces to bartenders, who acted as bet holders for the town. The bar-keeps would write down the amount of the bet and who was betting on whose gun, as was the custom; then everybody would wait for results.

When a gunnie was slow clearing leather and got shot for his slowness, half of Deadwood's gamblers would rush the bar-men to collect their winnings, while the other half cursed the Boothill-bound gunslinger who had inconsiderately caused them to lose their pile by getting himself killed.

Nobody had to wait very long for this kind of excitement in Deadwood. Citizens of the town didn't like each other, anyway, so it didn't take much to set off the powder keg. Deadwood was a peculiar melting pot of people. There were cattle-men, sheep-men, miners, sod-busters, men on the dodge, carpet-baggers, foreigners, and professional gamblers...all flung together in a crazy scramble of humanity that made Deadwood the toughest town since the taming of Dodge City.

The most colorful characters in the town, however, were the gamblers. Some were part-time gamblers, while others made it a full-time occupation.

Among them was Sam Collins, the heaviest gambler in the Black Hills country. Sam was a rich Easterner who had come to Deadwood to cure his lung fever. He didn't have anything to do all day except make bets and visit a doctor once a week. Sam would bet any amount with anybody on anything; he usually won.

Sam had never seen a gun-pulling party until he came to Deadwood, so it was a fascinating revelation for an Easterner to see the wild men of the West go to it. He would be seen at every shoot-out, making last minute bets with anybody and everybody who would fade him in regard to which man would walk away from the showdown scene and which man would have to be carried away to Boothill.

When it looked as if Wild Bill Hickock and Billy-The-Kid would come together in Deadwood, for a shoot-out, Sam Collins placed his money on Wild Bill's gun...

A TRUE STORY, STRANGER THAN FICTION

IT WAS Sam Collins who won a bet that later turned out to be the strangest wager ever made by a gambler. Down through the years this bet's outcome has remained the most unique coincidence in gambling history.

Around Deadwood, there had always been a lot of saloon talk as to what would be the result in a gun drawing contest between Wild Bill Hickok, former marshal of Dodge City, and Billy-The-Kid, a punk kid of sixteen who was already a prolific killer of men in New Mexico and points all around.

These blood-thirsty spectators always wanted to see the two best men matched in a shoot-out. And since Wild Bill and Billy-The-Kid were

the two best gunmen known, everybody craved to see a pistol-pulling between these two. It was an understood fact that the two would shoot it out if they ever met. Wild Bill didn't like the Kid's methods, and he let it be known. So, everybody knew there would be a fight if The Kid ever drifted into the Black Hills bragging about his fast guns.

Eventually, word drifted up country that The Kid was heading toward the Dakotas on a cattle drive with the Chisolm outfit of New Mexico, who had sold Tom Rockwell of Deadwood some cattle to stock a new ranch he had bought. When Deadwood gamblers got this word, bets were laid fast and furious.

Because of his reputation for lightning-smooth drawing and mad-dog instincts, most of the gamblers wanted to put their money on Billy-The-Kid. But Sam Collins was a personal friend of Wild Bill, and he believed in the former marshal's ability; he put five thousand dollars behind his belief.

Bert Baker, a gold mine operator, called Sam's wager, which was the biggest individual bet made on the dream-fight of the year. The two men put the bet into writing, the piece of paper stating that: *Wild Bill's gun will send Billy-The-Kid to Boothill, or Sam Collins shall pay Bert Baker $5000.*

Both men signed the paper, which was turned over to the barman at the *Criterion Saloon* for safekeeping. Bets were laid hard and heavy those first few days; after that, everybody sat back and waited anxiously for the arrival of Billy-The-Kid.

Then, like a nocturnal nightmare, disappointments started happening.

A week before the expected arrival of The Kid, Jack McCall, a local gunnie with a maniac's craving for fame, sneaked up behind Wild Bill while he was playing poker and shot him through the head. With Wild Bill dead and buried, all bets were automatically cancelled. However, gamblers still hoped to see the fabulous Billy-The-Kid in action against some of Deadwood's best gunmen.

But further disappointment was to come yet.

Billy-The-Kid didn't show up in Deadwood. Some say he had heard Wild Bill was in town...that he showed yellow and turned tail back to New Mexico when he was a few miles out...not knowing that Wild Bill was dead. Others say that the Kid was never on that particular cattle drive...that he was never within 400 miles of Deadwood. Whether the story was true or not, Billy-The-Kid was ridiculed heavily (behind his back) for the rest of his life, for running from Wild Bill after he was dead.

For sentimental reasons, Collins got the bet agreement from the *Criterion* bartender and kept it... "to show my grandchildren," he said. Both Collins and Baker liked to tell how Sam had bet on Wild Bill's gun to finish Billy-The-Kid. It gave them something to talk about on cold winter evenings.

IT WAS six years later that Sam Collins was looking through a newspaper sent to him by a friend in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The paper gave an account of how Pat Garrett had shot Billy-The-Kid in the dark at Pete Maxwell's ranch near Fort Sumner. On the next page, Sam read further details of the killing. One item held his interest: *Pat Garrett was carrying a lucky gun that night he got The Kid. It was the same gun carried by Wild Bill Hickok until his murder, and was later given to Garrett by Hickok's sister in Kansas.*

The coincidence was hard for Sam to believe.

He opened a drawer and took out a tin money box in which he kept personal papers. The bet agreement he had made with Baker was still there. He read it over again to make sure: *Wild Bill's gun will send Billy-The-Kid to Boothill, or Sam Collins shall pay Bert Baker $5000.* The paper only specified that Wild Bill's *gun* would finish off The Kid, not necessarily that Wild Bill would do the shooting.

Next morning, Sam took the agree-

ment and the newspaper from Santa Fe to Bert Baker's office and showed them to the miner. Amazed, Baker calmly reached into his money sack and counted out five thousand dollars in gold pieces and pushed them across the desk to Collins.

"I'll be durned," Baker said, "who'd have ever thought that The Kid would get killed with Wild Bill's gun in the hands of anybody except Wild Bill himself. It's worth five thousand just to witness a miracle like that."

But Collins, a fair sportsman, shoved the pile of gold back to Baker. "I wouldn't take your money on a technicality like that, Bert," he said. "Besides, we both knew what we were bettin' on; the only reason I won is because we accidentally worded the bet so that I was betting on Wild Bill's gun instead of Wild Bill himself. It was one of those coincidences that wouldn't happen again in a million years."

The five-thousand-dollar bet, which was a fortune in those days, was cancelled for all time and no gold ever changed hands. Nevertheless, the incident is still talked about in the Black Hills country as the strangest coincidence in the history of money betting.

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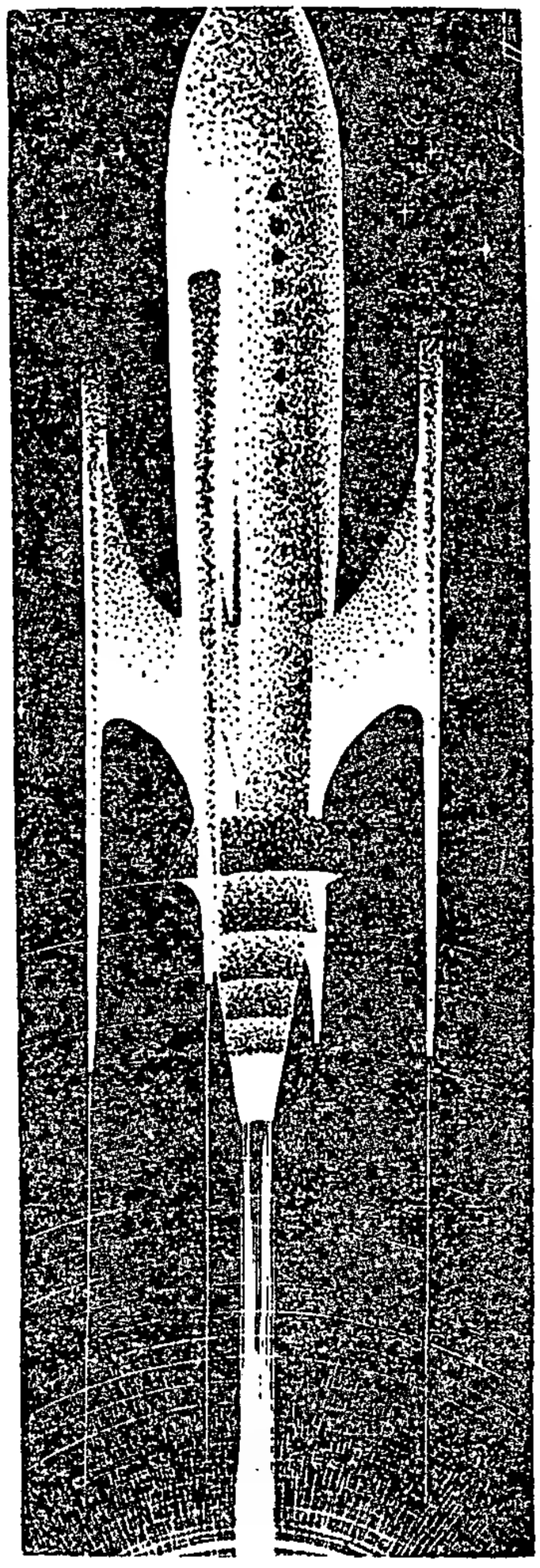

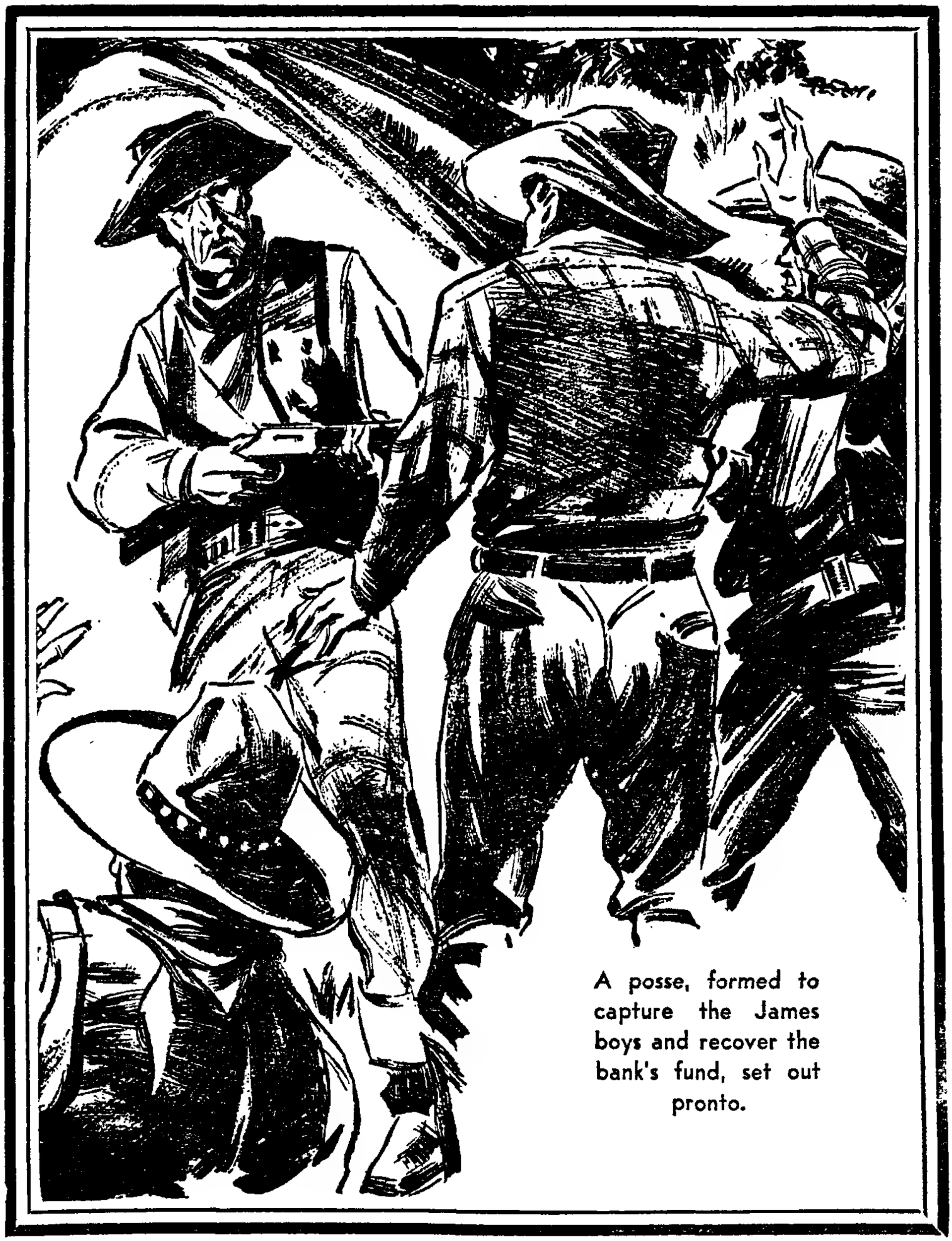

A posse, formed to capture the James boys and recover the bank's fund, set out pronto.

THE HIGHLIGHTS, in all probability, of the history of the town of Columbia, Adair County, Kentucky occurred just seventy-eight years ago last April 27th. That was when the dreaded and infamous James Gang of train, bank, and stagecoach robbers paid that staid little old town a hurried visit. And as they fled out of town southward, they left behind them a trail of bloodshed and cold-blooded murder that will long be remembered by its citizens.

In the blacksmith shop of John Conover, on Jamestown Street, in that little town a few years ago, stood a slack—or cooling—tub that, had it the power of speech, could possibly have told a most interesting

The James Boys Go Calling

TRUE FACT STORY

By James A. Hines

story of that rather hectic day in the history of Columbia.

That old slack-tub, which could be seen for many years after the visit of the bandits to the little town, had once been the depository for the safe-keeping of money and other valuables of Adair County's Deposit Bank of Columbia. It was a portion of the iron safe that formerly stood in the bank on that ill-fated day... seventy-nine years ago...when five determined and desperate outlaws robbed that institution of some $1,500.00. After brutally shooting down the bank's cashier, R.A.C. Martin, in the most cold-blooded manner imaginable, they escaped to the south by riding furiously out of town with a fusilade of pistol shots from their Colts accompanied by shouts and wild Rebel yells.

A reward of $2,500.00 was offered by Bank President T.T. Alexander, for the arrest and conviction of the robbers and murderers, but to date, that reward remains unclaimed. No one has ever been arrested for that robbery and murder, and it seems that now, after all the lapse of years that have intervened, no one will ever be called to justice for the crime.

Yes, if that old slack-tub that stood in Mr. Conover's blacksmith shop were suddenly to become endowed with the power of sight, and of speech, it probably would, and could, tell a very interesting story indeed.

Several days before the enactment of the crime and subsequent tragedy, five strangers rode into Columbia on fine high-stepping horses and put up at the home of Mr. Green Acres.

The five strangers represented themselves as livestock buyers and made themselves quite agreeable. They rode about the community, apparently seeking out cattle to purchase—but in reality to acquaint themselves with the lay of the land, and to assure themselves that, when it came time for them to make a hurried getaway, they would be in a position to take the most direct route out of town.

No suspicion at that time, or ever afterwards, was attached to Mr. Acres, for that sturdy old gentleman was as much astonished as was everyone else when he discovered the fact that he had unwittingly been host to five members of the infamous James Gang.

ON THE morning of the robbery of the bank, and the killing of the cashier, the five strangers, mounted on fine spirited horses, rode into the little quiet country town. They rode up to the bank; three of them dismounted and after a word or two with the other two, who remained in their saddles, the three entered the bank. The other two remained outside, still mounted.

The two mounted bandits took position commanding the streets that led into the square. They drew heavy Colt revolvers from their holsters and with much yelling began to ride about in the immediate vicinity of the bank; at the same time they fired their huge Colts at everyone on the streets. Very naturally the surprised citizens soon took to cover.

In the bank, at the time of the entry of the three outlaws, besides Mr. Martin, the cashier, who was busy at the unrailed desk, were Judge James Garnett, Major T.C. Winfrey, James T. Page, and W.H. Hudson.

These four gentlemen were seated at a large round table engaged in a conversation relating to a business deal.

As the three men entered the bank, they drew their pistols and covered the four seated men, one of them advancing directly to the cashier's desk.

One of the two bandits, who had the four seated gentlemen covered said in a hard brutal voice: "This is a hold-up! Git your damn hands high! We mean business! No damn fool tricks out of you, or, by hell, you'll git drilled!"

Judge Garnett was the first to recover from his surprise. He let out a yell, as loud as his somewhat short breath would permit. "Robbers! Bank robbers!" he shouted.

"Shut up you damn fool, or I'll blow your head off your shoulders!" snapped one of the bandits.

He approached the Judge a bit closer, his finger on the trigger of his Colt .45. Mr. Hudson siezed a chair and struck at the man with the pistol. The robber dodged, his finger on the trigger, the pistol exploded.

Judge Garnett with the quickness of thought, struck at the hand containing the gun; the bullet grazed his hand causing a wound which later necessitated the amputation of that member.

While the four fighting Kentuckians were keeping the two bandits pretty well occupied up front in the bank, the third outlaw, who was Jesse James, had approached Mr. Martin at the cashier's desk. He shoved his revolver within a foot of the cashier's head and with an oath commanded him to open that safe. "Be damn quick about it, or I'll scatter your brains all over Adair County! Hurry up now. I've got no time to fool!"

Mr. Martin had often said that he would never surrender the bank funds to a robber, that he'd die in defense of the money intrusted to his care.

He reached for a pistol that reposed in a drawer. It was his last move. Jesse James coolly pulled the trigger and a .45 caliber bullet crashed through the head of the brave...but foolish...cashier.

Meanwhile at the sound of the shot that had killed Martin, the two bandits that had been trying to hold the four gentlemen were momentarily distracted; Judge Garnett and the other three men escaped, running into the street and giving the alarm.

Thus left alone...with only a dead cashier...the three outlaws proceeded to loot the bank. They scooped up the loose change and what money there was in the cash drawer. Hastily placing their haul in the saddlebags with which they had entered the bank, they coolly walked to the front to join their two mounted companions who had been riding up and down in front of the bank shooting at every head that showed. The robbery had netted about $1,500.00...a small sum compared to what they would have got if they could have opened the safe—but still, nevertheless, a large amount in those days.

ARRIVING outside, the three who had robbed the bank quickly mounted their horses and the five, shooting and yelling, galloped out of town.

A man by the name of Montgomery Craven took a pot-shot at the yelling bandits as they passed his place of concealment but without results.

To the south of town, where a creek crossed the road, the five outlaws turned up the creek and across a field. Arriving at the far side where a gate led onto another road

they encountered a countryman by the name of William Conover.

Now Mr. Conover was far from being a coward. In fact, it had been said of him, "Bill Conover would fight a buzz-saw."

One of the mounted bandits yelled at him: "Hey you, there! Open that gate!" indicating a gate that led into the highway.

Bill Conover stiffened. He wasn't the kind of a man to be ordered around like that. "Hell!" he spit out. "Who in the hell do you think you are? Open it your ownself, if you want it opened! Who was your servant last year?"

Two or three of the mounted men snickered, but the man who had commanded Conover to open the gate did not. His face turned red at his companions' laughter and his eyes narrowed. With a lightning-like movement he whipped out a Colt .45 and cocking the hammer snapped: "By hell, you damn rube, I'll show you whether or not you open that gate! Open that gate and be damned quick about it or I'll blow your empty head offen your shoulders!"

We are told that Mr. Conover instantly complied and with a sweeping bow that would have been Chesterfieldian were it not for the decided tremor in his voice. He mumbled: "Why shore...shore, Gentlemen. I was only fooling!"

After this, until the day of his death, Bill Conover was known far and wide as "Open the Gate" Conover, to distinguish him from others of the same family name.

Meanwhile back in Columbia, excitement was intense. The indignation was great at the wanton murder of a beloved citizen and a posse was quickly formed under the leadership of Captain J. R. Hindman, later a Lieutenant-Governor of the Commonwealth. Pursuit was started, but without result; the bandits had covered their tracks too well and escaped.

Of course, every effort was made to apprehend and bring them to justice, and Mr. Alexander, President of the bank, offered a reward of $2,500.00 for the murderers of Martin.

AN AFTERMATH of the robbery occurred several years later, when a white-bearded old codger appeared with a show in Columbia and set up a tent. He claimed to be the only and original Jesse James and was taking in quite a few quarters from Columbia's credulous citizens when the town marshal interfered.

At that time, Columbia had a Marshal, a certain Evan Atkin. After visiting the show grounds and listening to the claims of the so-called Jesse James, Marshal Atkin went to the court-house and hunted up the original bench warrant issued when the real Jesse James had held up the bank and escaped.

Marshal Atkin returned to the show grounds, and arriving in front of the tent where the so-called Jesse James was holding forth, said to that supposed desperado, "I don't know whether you're Jesse James or not, but if you are, I'm going to serve this warrant on you for murder and bank-robbery in just thirty minutes." It is said within the time limit set by Marshal Atkin that show had folded its tents and stolen away.

Of course no one can be positive as to just who the five bandits were that held up the bank and robbed it on that long ago day, April 7th, 1872, but it has always been pretty well substantiated that besides Jesse James, the others were Frank James, Cole, Bob and James Younger.

JESSE JAMES as most know was killed by Bob Ford at his home in St. Joseph, Missouri, April 3, 1882; Frank James died from old age on his mother's old home-farm in Clay County, Missouri in 1915. The three Younger boys were captured at Northfield, Minnesota after an unsuccessful attempt to rob the bank there. Tried, they pled guilty and were sentenced to life imprisonment, but were afterwards pardoned—with the exception of Bob who died while still confined. James, it is said, was accidently killed while cleaning a

[*Turn To Page* 128]

STRANGER ON THE STAGECOACH

By REX WHITECHURCH

Buckshot Tilson was sure that the stagecoach holdup was some manner of inside job. But all the stories jibed—only they jibed too well. Then a kid's dog was shot, and Buckshot began to see the light!

BUCKSHOT TILSON reached Gold City early in the morning on the stagecoach. It had been raining all night and the Concord was two hours late. The wheels were full of mud; there was mud on the windows and the ancient lanterns were plastered with clay. The steaming horses were panting, and there wasn't a spot on their bellies or their legs that wasn't caked with the reddish mire.

Buckshot had come to Gold City as a cash-paying customer of the Red Ball Stageline. But this had not been strictly necessary since Tilson, a meek appearing little man of thirty, with raven black hair and black eyes, was an employee of the Adams Express Company. He preferred,

however, to travel sort of incognito; he figured that his present mission required caution.

In appearance he was deceiving. He stood five seven, was blocky, kind of squatty. His face was younger than his years. He limped, dragging his left foot to a noticeable extent. He smoked a long cigar, and his store bought clothes were garish. He wore a high celluloid collar, a red-and-white polky dot tie. He was carefully barbered. His red vest had a double row of pearl buttons down the front of it. Somehow the man looked plumpish, but he was not soft; he was hard as stone. His button shoes had toothpick toes.

Dan McFee, the Adams Express agent, said to Charley Patterson, the driver, "Where did you get the pilgrim, Chuck? Some of the boys will be wanting to knock the buttons off them patent leathers."

Ham Cox, the postmaster, nudged McFee and added, "It's a crime to fetch a pilgrim like him to Gold City. Must be a drummer selling window glass."

"Or mebbe ladies' underclothing," smirked McFee.

Charley Patterson climbed down and watched them unload the strongbox. The stagedriver was tall, rail-thin, blue-eyed, sandy-headed. He wore a blond mustache of which he was exceedingly proud. Although his attire was rugged and his boots coarse, he had a large diamond ring on the middle finger of his left hand. One gun, a black-butted .44 was carried inside the waistband of his dungarees.

A crowd was speculatively appraising the dude. They looked inquiringly at one another when Buckshot reached inside the coach and produced a double-barreled shotgun. He picked up his valise, put the gun under his arm and started up the board sidewalk. A stern voice hailed him: "Just a minute, stranger! Come back here!"

Something in the insolent voice nettled Tilson; he was unaccustomed to being addressed in such an insulting manner. He turned slowly. "If you want to see me, you come here!"

Bill Madden, the Gold City marshal, said to McFee and Cox, "For all we know he's the gunnysack bandit."

McFee chuckled, and Cox laughed brazenly outright.

Madden, a portly officer, forty-seven inches around the waist, tilted his Stetson forward. His little bloodshot eyes were rodent-sharp. "You heard me," he said; "come back here!"

Tilson hated to give in, but it was not smart to raise a ruckus. He stomped lightly forward.

"What you doin' with that shotgun?" Madden sneered.

"It's not a shotgun, it's an elephant gun. I'm a hunter; like to shoot rabbits. You've got mountain cats out here, too. I went to Africa once, to shoot big game. Why?"

The crowd roared with laughter. Somebody loitering before a false-front exclaimed: "Reckon he wore them button shoes in Africa?" This provoked more guffaws. Madden marched around Buckshot, sizing him up, his pudgy hands on his hips.

"He ain't tall enough to be Gunnysack," he decided openly. "Besides, he ain't the caliber... Mister Man, you've come to a poor town for your recreation. We're hunting a bandit. He wears a gunnysack mask, and he robbed Charley Patterson of sixty-five thousand in gold nuggets. He got away. It ain't safe for strangers to go totin' shotguns around Gold City; we got Vigilantes, and they might get funny ideas."

Buckshot's face remained soft. There was no harshness in it. He gazed up and down the muddy street of frame sheds. He had seen twenty such towns, gold camps; he was used to them. He returned his gaze to the faces of the amused spectators.

"I'm all right, marshal," he said, in a low tone. "I don't cause trouble and I stay out of quarrels of all kinds. I'm going to be here a few days; this shotgun is the only weapon I own."

There was a low murmur of amused constraint. Obviously Buckshot had them puzzled. Then he limped away. Silence deepened in his wake.

THE BIGGEST building in town was the hotel, but it wasn't anything to crow about. Buckshot was informed by the bespectacled clerk that the charge was ten dollars a day, including meals. He climbed a rickety staircase to his room; he locked the door, left the key in the lock and sat down by a window fronting the street.

He pulled a derringer with two barrels from his pocket and placed it on the window-sill. He fished a letter out of his pocket, removed his derby and carefully perused the missive for the tenth time since he had received it.

Denver, Colorado

Dear Tilson:

You are to proceed at once, without further communication, to Gold City, ninety miles south of here, paying cash fare, on the first stage. You will change to a stage at Calico Rock, on a branch run, and keep your eyes open. Eight days ago, one of the most daring robberies ever instituted, was carried out by a lone bandit wearing a gunnysack hood. The only passenger was a woman, Kate Ramshire. She described the outlaw.

He is, according to Kate Ramshire, six feet tall, well-made, weighing about two hundred pounds. He ordered the strongbox dropped into the road, and shot the guard through the heart. The holdup occurred four miles this side of Gold City, where a cottonwood stands in the middle of the trail. The gold shipment, sixty five thousand dollars, was in nuggets.

Our instructions: Work with caution. Investigate the situation painstakingly, and ferret it out, using your own technique. We have a guess that the bandit was tipped off by someone in the confidence of the local agent; but the latter, McFee, is a man of irreproachable character and has been with the company five years. He is a man of moderate drinking habits, if any, and his loyalty had previously been tested.

But the leak might have come through someone close to McFee, a loafer around the office, even perhaps the local town marshal. At any rate, we believe that if there was a tip-off, it came from someone well within McFee's confidence. Do not report to us until you have solved the case, or abandoned it as hopeless.

The Adams Express Company

At four o'clock, after a rest of several hours, Buckshot made his way to the *Miner's Rest Saloon and Dance Hall.* He wore his dapper grey plaid suit and his button shoes had been polished; he left his shotgun in the room.

The small pine-box room was full of customers, and a roulette game was going. Buckshot saw that he had attracted attention but ignored the smirking voices of entertainment-seekers. He bought a bottle of beer and retired to a table near the dance-hall. This was another building, attached to the saloon, with a big door in the side of the wall.

He consumed his beer with a show of relish. Several men passed him, and one stumbled over his outstretched feet. The giant—he was a big man with red whiskers—whipped round and snarled, "Did you do that on purpose?"

At that precise interval, Charley Patterson, the stage driver, emerged from the dance-hall. "Let him alone," he grated. "Shore as hell, you'd better let the little fellow alone. He ain't botherin' nobody."

Red-Beard droned out, "He tried his damnation best to trip me, Charley. He—"

"Go on, you loud-mouthed bully!" Charley Patterson took a quick step toward the giant and hit him smack in the chest. The blow sent Red-Whiskers reeling away. Evidently he didn't want trouble with the

stage-driver, for he turned and maneuvered his way back to the bar.

BUCKSHOT saw Patterson stand glowering at the drinkers through the smoke bank. "If any of that lousy bunch cause you trouble, you call on me."

Buckshot grinned his appreciation. "Have a drink, Charley," he said cordially. "Everybody else calls you that and you don't seem to mind none. I'm doing it because you seem to be a solid friend to tie in with."

Patterson smiled, sat down and extended his long legs away out in front of him. Buckshot saw the butt of his gun sticking above the waistband of his dungarees. He saw something else, too—the five-thousand-dollar diamond ring.

The drinks came. Buckshot rolled a cigar in his mouth. Charley Patterson, at close range, had a seamed brown face and a thin mouth. It was an unusual face inasmuch as it showed no expression, even when he laughed.

"Been driving that hack long?" Buckshot asked presently, and lit a match on his shoe.

"Almost two years." Patterson warmed up even more. "Had an admirable record till about eight days ago. Got robbed and my guard killed. Me and Baldy was right close friends; he left a widow and six kids, too, drat it. We made up a pot for her and buried him. Don't know how come he got it, he was so good with his carbine."

Buckshot did not feign to encourage more conversation on the subject. But Patterson continued, speaking in a loud voice. "There we was, makin' Shooter's Hill, with the cottonwood comin' closer. Then it happened. A shot cracked our horses to a stop, and the Gunnysack, he was there, a carbine on me and Baldy. He ordered the box dropped, and Baldy crawled over the roof and shoved it off. As soon as the box hit the dust, Gunnysack shot him."

Buckshot licked his cigar and stuck it back in his mouth. "The marshal said sixty-five thousand—that's a fortune. Did you go back out there?"

"I didn't, but the marshal and McFee, and the Vigilantes, they rode out to the cottonwood and started a search but they made a water haul. They couldn't find much to go on, except for a couple of carbine shells in the road; they didn't even find Baldy's hat, and it fell off when he was shot. Must've been the bandit needed a headpiece."

Buckshot nodded and thrust a cigar out to Patterson. "Have a Virginia Cheeroot. They're three for a nickel, but a good smoke."

Patterson's hands trembled a little when he lit the stogie. "What gets me is how Nellie and her kids lost Old Baldy. I can't help thinkin' about it."

"Yes, of course," agreed Buckshot. "It's always tough on wimmin with children, to lose their bread-earners."

"Rough on her," Patterson said. He got up. "If any of them drunks over there start anything, you tell them I'm your friend. I reckon they know it by now." He paused, the cigar held aloft. "How long you figger on bein' here, and what's your name?"

"Bittercreek," said Buckshot. "Percival M. Bittercreek. I hate to own up to it, Charley, but—well, I sell wimmins' goods, corsets and things like that."

Patterson seemed about to break out in laughter, but he quickly sobered. "I reckon it's every man to his trade; only keep it quiet as you can, Percival. You know how them iron-jawed miners are if they get something to tickle their funny bone."

"Oh, I'm not ashamed of my profession," Buckshot said placidly; "never was. You see, my folks have been in the corset-making business almost one hundred years. We take great pride in our products, Charley." He hesitated, then lowered his voice and stuck his thumbs in the armholes of his vest. "If by chance you know any wimmin—"

The stagedriver looked dubiously at him. "Well, now, let me see. I'm going to get hooked up come this October. Got a gal that's an entertainer back there, one of the prettiest dancers you ever saw. I'm hop-

in' she can quit workin' when we're married. I was going to be raised, but that holdup kind of stalled things off. I'll see her, and mebbe I'll send her over to the hotel. 'Course it's sort of embarrassing to fetch up such a subject—"

"You could put it this way, Charley," Buckshot ventured. "You just mention that I'm here from Saint Joe, Missouri, with some ladies' ready-to-wear. I carry stockings and dresses, too."

"All right, Percival. Count on me. I'll be seeing you again." Patterson lifted his hand in a friendly salute, stood a moment glaring at the men lined before the bar, and then stomped on back to the dance-hall.

❁

BUCKSHOT TILSON was in a precarious situation and knew the least blunder would cost him more than he could afford to pay. He didn't mind the ridicule of the men of Gold City; he went on plying his wares. He soon had more appointments at the hotel than he could manage to handle. He hired Baldy's widow to help him, to do the fitting while he merely took the orders and sold the merchandise. It was the third day before the woman he was looking for showed up.

Meanwhile, he furthered his friendship with Patterson, and got on good terms with McFee, the express agent. Madden, the fat town marshal, was obviously reluctant to get acquainted with him.

Patterson met the Denver stage at Calico Rock, twenty miles away. There the other stage turned east, after transferring the Gold City passengers and express to Patterson's Concord. There was only the one stagecoach; Patterson drove it back and forth and was paid by the express company.

Kate Ramshire was a deep-saffron blonde; she had violet-tinted eyes, cut elongated, a deep bosom. She was loud, brassy; her manners were without polish or refinement. But Buckshot was extremely solicitous and made progress, seeing her twice at the *Miner's Rest*, where he danced with her. They met four times before he brought up the subject of the sixty-five-thousand-dollar robbery.

She described the happening exactly as the company had written in their letter to Buckshot. There wasn't a detail changed, or missing that he could spot; he had been wary in his approach, carrying out his role of a sissified drummer.

"It surely must've been a terrible experience, Miss Ramshire," he said. "Weren't you frightened?"

"Out of a year's growth," she admitted, smiling her sweetest at Buckshot. "When Old Baldy was shot, I was scared stiff. I can see him now, tumbling head first off the stagecoach. I had been to Calico Rock to buy some dresses. They don't have anything in Gold City fit for a lady to wear. I always tell Charley never to buy me anything here."

"Well," said Buckshot Tilson in his most ostentatious manner and in keeping with the role he was portraying, "I shall be delighted to make you a handsome wedding gift, Miss Ramshire. You have been a very good customer."

The music started up and, although it was singularly hot in the close confines of the pine-walled room, he waltzed twice with her before he excused himself and went back to the hotel.

BUCKSHOT was thankful that he'd had the foresight to select a line that would enable him to waylay suspicion and mistrust. The merchandise he had purchased in Denver, investing more than four hundred dollars, but he was getting his money back, with a nice profit.

He had been in Gold City a week when he appeared for the first time since his arrival with the shotgun. He walked quickly to the town's one livery-stable and hired a saddle-horse. The fourteen-year-old hostler had a mop of carrot-tinted hair and a million copper-hued freckles. His apparel was denim, and one gallus, with a nail stuck through it, held up the bib of his overalls.

"Is that the stagecoach my friend Charley Patterson drives?" Buckshot asked carelessly, sauntering over to

the Concord that stood in a wide areaway between horse stalls.

"That's her," the boy said, looking down at the dog slouched against his leg. The dog was of the long-eared bloodhound species; he was at least part bloodhound.

"You've got a sad-looking pup there," Buckshot said, shifting his shotgun from one hand to the other. "I like dogs; but he looks like he's about to cry."

"He's sad on account of bein' half bloodhound," the boy said. "But he ain't no pup; he'll be six, come the twenty-first of this month. He ain't got but one enemy in town. That's the marshal. Old Madden don't like him none a-tall, has threatened to shoot him. I keep him tied up most of the time."

"What's your name, fella?" Buckshot asked the boy.

"Harry Crabtree," he said. "Just call me Harry, Mister."

"My name's Percival Bittercreek." Buckshot patted the dog's head. "I'll see Marshal Madden and try to make a deal so your dog will be safe."

"I'd shore be much obliged," Harry said. "If anything was to happen to Joey, I' reckon it would hurt me like all sixty, Mister Bittercreek. Joe, he used to belong to Baldy Handerson, the shotgun guard that rode with Patterson, but he got killed and Nellie give him to me. Of course me and Joe have been friends ever since he was a little fellow."

Harry Crabtree then went out to a stall to fetch Buckshot's horse, and the latter turned to look at the red-topped Concord. He inspected the interior with a close vigilance, missed not the smallest detail, and scrambled down out of it when he heard Harry returning with the pony. Something about the stagecoach—about any stagecoach—fascinated him—but he had no particular reason for inspecting this one. He mounted and rode out at a brisk canter.

●

He was gone about two hours and returned to Gold City, to find Harry crying over his dead dog.

"He come in here and before I could stop him," the boy moaned; "he shot Joey right in the head with his pistol. He said folks was complaining about poor little Joe keepin' 'em awake of nights. Oh, Mister Bittercreek, what am I ever going to do without Joey? He was my only companion on them long nights, the best friend I ever had." The trembling, tearful boy dropped down on his knees, and sobbed, lifting the dog's bloody head on his knee.

Buckshot's mouth tautened. He was staring through misty eyes at the kid's lost hopes, lying there in a motionless slump where death had claimed him. For a moment the man stood peering down; there was a deep ache in his chest.

"Harry," he said softly, "we—we can't help dying when the time comes. Looks, though, as if Joey didn't have his chance. We'll give him a nice burial. I—" He walked over and leaned against the stagecoach, and remembered when, as a boy, his dog had accidentally been killed while hunting. He had cried all night, and all the next day, and nothing had seemed right to him after that. He had made a hundred trips or more to his little friend's grave, and had knelt on the ground, and talked to him. Only a child's love for his dog made the worst separation in life when death came.

"He always slept in the coach there," Harry said. "He'd stretch out on the floor, and if anyone came into the barn, he'd wake me up. I'd get him bones over at the Chinaman's Cafe; the Chink liked him and he'd give me big bones for him; and Joey, he'd hide them in the Concord."

The tear-wet face was raised to the man against the stage. Buckshot did not leave the boy until he had quietly buried Joey on the vacant lot back of the stable. He gave Harry a handful of change and said, "You buy another dog, son. I'll guarantee it won't be shot by Madden."

The youth, startled by the different sound of Tilson's voice, darted a quick look at him. He rubbed his eyes and smiled bravely, like one who knew his best friend was gone,

and was being brave in the presence of a person he had learned to worship.

BUCKSHOT TILSON found Madden loafing on a bench in front of the express office. He was tired from a fruitless survey of the robbery scene.

"When I come back from Calico Rock tomorrow," Buckshot said, "I'm going to have a visit with you, Madden. Ever since I came here, you've shadowed me; you must be afraid of something."

There was nobody in the street; it was unmercifully hot. Dust rose in smoky spirals, whipped by a flatiron wind that blew across the scorched hills. Sweat streamed down Madden's face. He wobbled erect, crammed his hat on his head. He had been fanning himself with it. Startled by the steel in Buckshot's voice, he cast one nervous glance at the shotgun; then he grabbed for it.

Tilson agilely evaded the fat man and slapped him. He slapped him twice, palm first, then backhanded, and the blows echoed up and down the awning-covered sidewalk. Madden blindly groped for the gun on his belt. Buckshot's fist clamped about his wrist, and the marshal was helpless to break that hold.

"If you want to get killed," Tilson said between compressed lips, "try pullin' that gun. I'm walking away from you. I'm walking slow; you'll have your chance, if you've got the guts to take it."

"I'll have the Vigilantes on you," Madden expostulated. "I'll have you strung up—"

Buckshot Tilson met this threat with a curt laugh. "What for?" His voice was soft. "Who would believe what you'd tell them about meek Percival Bittercreek?"

Then he turned round and slowly walked away from the town marshal. He knew he was safe. From now on Madden would be trying to find out why he had grown so bold; and he would not strike until he had taken steps to find out what lay behind this sudden change of character.

Buckshot loafed an hour at the *Miner's Rest,* observing the actions of the girl, Kate Ramshire. What he saw led him to believe she wasn't as crazy about Charley Patterson as she had pretended to be. She took several drinks with a young miner, and Buckshot walked behind a curtain which hung before a table in a booth and parted it just as Kate came quickly out of the man's arms, her violet eyes beady and filled with hate for the encroacher.

"What's the idea?" the man demanded, rising to face Buckshot. "I've a good notion to cave your face in; you knowed me and her was in here together and didn't want to be interrupted."

"I sincerely beg your pardon," Buckshot said apologetically. "I did not know. To tell the honest truth, I mistook you for Charley Patterson. It was only natural, since Miss Ramshire is engaged to him, and—"

"Please," she exclaimed. "Don't say any more about this. I—I was at fault, Mister Bittercreek. You won't say anything about this to Charley? You wouldn't—?"

The miner looked his consternation; he gulped and started to speak, then closed his mouth quickly and mopped globules of sweat from his brow. It was apparent that he was afraid of Charley Patterson. Buckshot had found this fear quite prevalent amoung the men of the town, and he wondered how the skinny stagedriver had managed to create the impression that he was bad—so bad that he defied any of the two or three hundred men of Gold City to start anything with him. But there was no question regarding this; it was an established fact. Buckshot remembered how the giant, Red-Whiskers, had walked away after taking a hard smashing blow in the chest from the tall, lean stagedriver. And Red-Whiskers had been big enough to break Patterson in two.

"Well, I'll not cause you any trouble, Miss Ramshire," Buckshot promised. "I'm going to Calico Rock tomorrow to pick up some merchandise that has been shipped to me from Saint Joe, and I'll have a new display for the ladies of Gold City to see when I come back."

"You can count upon me for a

sale or two," she said sweetly, trying to impress him with her sincerity, but not failing to show how she loathed him because she could not mask her tricky eyes. He walked away and left them, did not look back. When he asked a miner meekly why everybody was scared of Charley Patterson, the man regarded him quizzically and said: "Why, damnation, ain't you heard? He's the best man with a gun ever hit Gold City!"

●

BUCKSHOT spent a restless night. The next morning, when he entered the Concord in front of the express office—they'd held the stage for him because he was a few minutes late—he was surprised to find that he had a traveling companion, Miss Kate Ramshire. He greeted her with a warm smile and clambered aboard. Charley Patterson waved at him. Kate sat opposite Buckshot, a hatbox beside her which, with her full-skirted dress, just about took up the seat. The driver then cracked the long whip, yelled at the six horses, and the stage thundered out of town.

The woman was strangely quiet, and Buckshot did not pursue conversation. The rocking, jolting Concord made it necessary to hold to the handstrap to keep from being hurled from his seat. Dust rolled in at the open windows, almost stifling the two passengers. When the clattering wheels hit a wagon bridge, the disturbance nearly deafened Buckshot. They started up Shooter's Hill then, and presently came to the cottonwood. Here Charley Patterson halted the team. Buckshot heard him squirming down from the high seat, and a moment later he thrust his head in and said: "Figgered mebbe you'd like to see where Gunnysack took the sixty-five thousand away from me, Bittercreek. Got time to show you around; I can make up for the minutes we lose 'tween here and Calico Rock."

He chuckled and stepped back away from the coach, so Buckshot could crawl through the door.

Buckshot ducked as he vaulted through the opening. The gun club swung at his head by the woman behind him grazed his skull. Kate Ramshire almost tumbled head foremost to the ground behind him, but managed to stay in the Concord.

He came up grappling with Charley Patterson. The latter had one arm locked around his head.

Buckshot's effort to free himself seemed futile. Patterson was exert-

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ing a murderous pressure. No man could stand that for long; his brain would burst. He tried lifting the stagedriver bodily, but Patterson rendered this impossible by spraddling his legs so far apart he was solidly braced. Finally he threw Buckshot to the ground and they rolled around in the dust.

Against the swelling muscles of the agile stagedriver, Buckshot Tilson struggled with increasing determination. His own rugged body was like rawhide and Patterson was surprised. Buckshot's chances were greater on the ground, and he was soon free and with amazing alacrity he scrambled to his feet. He did not intend for Patterson to get to his gun. Realizing that his opponent was not to be crushed as easily as he had contemplated crushing him, the Concord's driver became desperate. It was hard to stop the headlong rushes, but Buckshot flicked a smashing right fist to Patterson's chin, to keep him roiled so he would not pause to pull his Colt revolver.

BUCKSHOT drove another blow to the pit of the man's stomach, and then was swept off his feet as Patterson came tearing in. Buckshot went staggering away, hit by Patterson's shoulder, and almost went down. He was off balance when the driver hit him again. The wind went out of Buckshot as he slammed against the cottonwood. The numbing impact left him helpless for a split second, but his antagonist was blind to his chance. He had stopped to pull a tooth loose that hung on a string of flesh from his lower lip.

Kate Ramshire could not see the fighters. She sat in the coach with the gun across her knee, waiting, afraid to show herself for fear Patterson would start blazing at his adversary with his black-butted .44; she did not want to risk getting in the way of a bullet. Besides, the dust had been kicked up into a swirling vortex that was worse than pungent smoke.

Patterson now had his revolver halfway out of the waistband of his dungarees when Buckshot, snapping out of the dazed condition caused by his collision with the tree, shot his antagonist with the two-barreled derringer. Patterson staggered back, blood spurting from the wound in his throat, a vital wound that carried him to his knees, then on into a huddle of quivering flesh in the trail dust.

Racing around to the side of the Concord, Buckshot saw the woman with the heavy revolver in her hand. She attempted to line it even with his face, but he hurled the derringer's last slug at her and saw her wilt suddenly, her head falling down upon her bosom and her long saffron hair coming loose in a cascade that reached the floor of the stagecoach. He knew, though, that she had merely been creased by the bullet. They had not counted on Buckshot having a pistol.

The town marshal was captured by the Vigilantes, headed by McFee. They did not give even him a chance to pray, but strung him up to a rafter in a high wooden awning, where they left him. Buckshot then went to the hotel and wrote out his memorandum to the company he represented.

Gold City, Colorado.

Memorandum to the Adams Express Company. The Gold City Case.

Charley Patterson, Kate Ramshire and Town Marshal Bill Madden, the culprits, instigated the sixty-five-thousand-dollar gold robbery, at Patterson's suggestion. Madden obtained the information regarding the shipment from the office of the company there, being in the confidence of Dan McFee, the agent. But McFee did not know Madden was hanging around him for that purpose.

I suspected Madden's part in the robbery when he shot the livery stable attendant's dog; the dog, part bloodhound, had formed the habit of sleeping in the stagecoach. I found the gold the

same day; it was hidden under one of the seats. The dog was dangerous because he would scent Baldy Henderson's hat—which Patterson made the mistake of cramming into the cache along with the strong box, because it was a new hat and Patterson's greed wouldn't let him leave it on the ground where it had fallen when he shot Baldy from behind.

They figured the gold would be safer in the Concord's hiding place for a time.

Kate Ramshire's confession ties up the case; she left nothing out. I trapped them when I made it known to Madden and to Kate Ramshire that I was going to Calico City on the morning stage. I slapped Madden and aroused his fear by letting him suspect that I was someone other than the man I represented myself to be.

The vigilantes extracted full payment from Marshal Madden: he was hanged, with his boot-toes touching the wooden planks of the sidewalk near the express office.

Incidentally, Patterson was wearing a five-thousand-dollar diamond ring, and I considered this strange. His salary was not sufficient to enable him to make such a buy. I soon learned by watching him that he did not gamble, and Kate Ramshire wasn't making enough money as a percentage girl to purchase a diamond of that size for him.

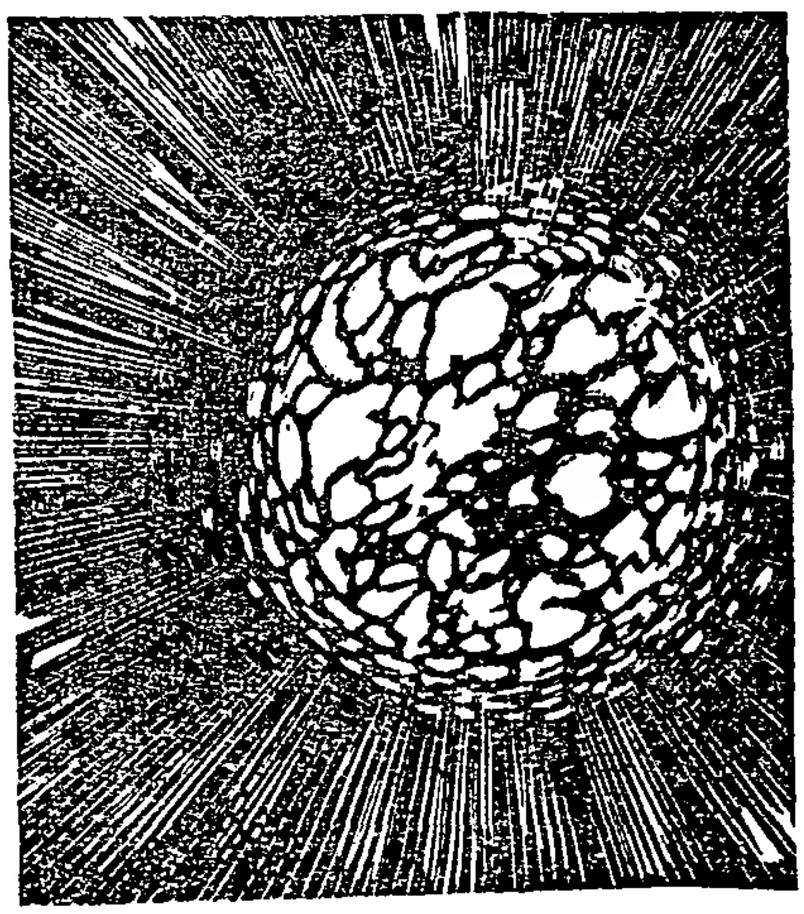
Everything I guess is complete. Kate Ramshire is in jail at Calico Rock; she will stay there until you make disposition of her case.

Signed

Wyatt (Buckshot) Tilson.

PS: I have rewarded Harry Crabtree, whose dog indirectly led to the solution of the case, with a check for one thousand dollars and consider the price meager enough. Please add that amount to my expense.

Buckshot.



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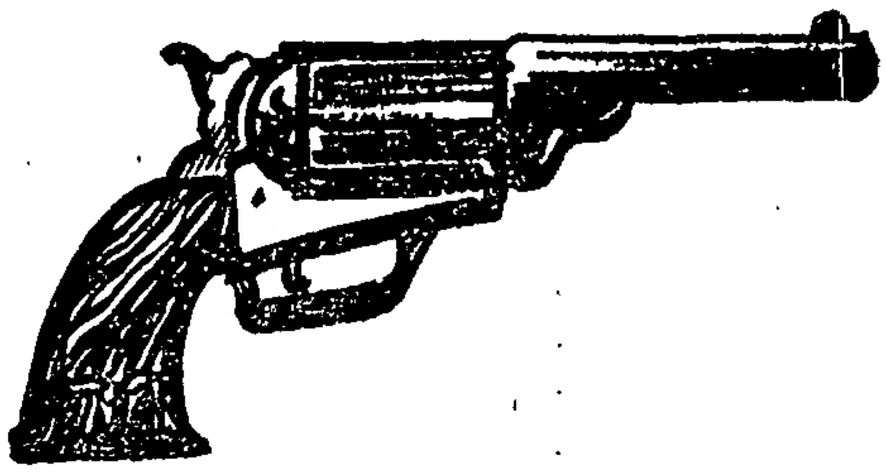

THE SPIN

TRUE FACT FEATURE
by The Lawdog

SHERIFF Ben Halliday kept the muzzle of his colt aimed at the midsection of the man in front of him. "Your time has about run out, Cayute Pete," said the law officer. "Hand over your gun and we'll head for the jail."

The wanted criminal grinned and then remarked, "Guess you got me at last, Sheriff." Finishing those words he held out his six-shooter to the sheriff, with the handle foremost, and his finger hooked inside the trigger guard. Then it happened! The six-shooter in Cayute Pete's hand made an upward spin. The butt rested in his hand and his thumb dropped to the hammer, cocking it. The finger pulled the trigger and the sheriff slumped to the floor—dead!

It reads swell in Western fiction. The question is: Is this a figment of the writer's imagination or did it really happen in fact?

This "spin" is said to have been used by John Wesley Hardin and is so recorded in his autobiography. Hardin paid Abilene a visit during the period that Wild Bill Hickok was the law.

As Hardin tells the story, "I spent most of my time in Abilene in the saloons and gambling houses, playing poker, faro and seven-up. One day I was rolling ten-pins and my best horse was hitched outside in front of the saloon. I had two six-shooters on and course I knew the saloon people would raise a row if I did not pull them off. Several Texans were there rolling ten-pins and drinking. I suppose we were pretty noisy. Wild Bill came in and said we were making too much noise and told me to pull off my pistols until I got ready to go out of town. I told him I was ready to go now, but did not propose to put up my pistols, go or no go. He went out and I followed him. I started up the street when some one behind me shouted out, 'Set up. All down but nine.'

"Wild Bill whirled around and met me. He said: 'What are you howling about and what are you doing with those pistols on?"

"I said: 'I am just taking in the town.'

"He pulled his pistol and said: 'Take those pistols off. I arrest you.'

"I said, 'All right,' and pulled them out of the scabbard, but while he was reaching for them I reversed them and whirled them over on him with the muzzles in his face, springing back at the same time. I told him to put his pistol up, which he did. I cursed him for a long-haired scoundrel that would shoot a boy with his back to him (as I had been told he intended to do me). He said, 'Little Arkansaw, you have been wrongly informed.'"

Net result, according to Hardin, was that he and Wild Bill went in the saloon and both had drinks. At a later time, when a policeman tried to arrest him, Hardin used the spin and killed the officer.

I've practised the spin myself, and even taught it to my older boy so when he plays "cowboys" he has a good trick at hand. Funny thing though—both Wild Bill and Wes Hardin died without a fighting chance.

CADAVERS IN THE KITCHEN

HILARIOUS FACT STORY

by John T. Lynch

THE BOARDERS at Belinda's establishment went on a short hunger strike. They sat down at the long table, as usual, but not one of the hungry gang of rugged miners reached for any of the food on the well stocked table. They were sore about the two cadavers in the kitchen.

Belinda Ross, her shotgun within easy reach, took her place at the head of the table. As a rule, she had to threaten a few of her paying guests with sudden death if they

did not mind their manners and eat slowly, like gentlemen, and ask for platters to be passed, instead of roughly reaching out and grabbing them.

"How come you starvin' hyenas ain't eatin'?" she asked.

After an uncomfortable silence one of the braver miners spoke up. "Belinda," he said, keeping a wary eye on her shotgun, "we decided that you got to stop usin' th' kitchen where you cook our food as an undertakin' place. It's got so that this whole house smells like that there stuff you use to embalm th' late lamenteds with. Even th' food tastes like formaldehyde; we all come to th' conclusion that cookin' meals and preparin' corpses for burial in the same room don't mix. Nobody can serve th' livin' an' dead at th' same time."

Belinda Ross made a move for her shotgun, then thought better of it; maybe the boys did have reason to complain...

When Belinda Ross and her husband, Arthur, arrived in the mining town of Keystone, Dakota Territory, in the early nineties, they opened up two separate business establishments. Arthur, who had been an undertaker in the east, opened the town's first funeral parlor, and was appointed coroner. Belinda opened a large and welcome boarding house, which she ran with an iron hand.

When Arthur Ross died one of the few natural deaths ever recorded in Keystone, Belinda took over the coroner job. Being a businesswoman, she did not want to lose the great profits that came from ministering to the many bullet-riddled and gun-punctured bodies of defunct citizens, who had lost arguments concerning priority rights to claims, extra aces in card games, and general name-calling contests.

Belinda had helped her late husband often enough to know the basic necessities of a cadaver about to be buried. She had become so accustomed to dead bodies that she overlooked what opinions others might have when she decided to save money by closing the old parlor and doing the coroner work in her boarding-house kitchen.

For a time her boarders ignored the fact that Belinda might stop mashing potatoes long enough to do an embalming job, then go back to the potatoes. But, as the months went by, the odor of embalming fluid, made mostly of formaldehyde, began to permeate the place. The time had arrived, then, when the miners made a protest.

"You boys is gettin' too squeamish," said Belinda. "Howsomever, if that's th' way you feel about it, I'll rent that empty storeroom up th' street for my undertakin' business."

The boarders, thankful that Belinda saw their point, dug in and ate as heartily as usual, despite the formaldehyde-flavored apple pie.

AS BELINDA had suspected, running a boarding house in one place, and an undertaking parlor in another, kept a person on the run. After she had separated the locales in which she served food to the living and shot preservative into the dead, she was always pressed for time. Being of an efficient and inventive nature, she created several time-saving devices and methods in both places.

Her more prized invention was a "revolving table" for the boarding house. With the help of the town carpenter, she constructed a double-decked, circular table for her boarders. It was nine feet in diameter, and would seat twenty-five eaters. The lower part was stationary. The upper part, on a pivot arrangement, could be revolved and stopped at any point.

This proved to be a great time-saver. All Belinda had to do was pile the platters of hot food on the moving section, then call her boarders to eat. Thus, they could help themselves; she could leave and go back to her latest victim of hectic life in Keystone. No longer could she sit at the head of the table and demand good manners and genteel eating. They'd just have to shift for themselves. Profit before culture.

All went well for a few weeks. But, one evening, as Belinda was happily injecting purple fluid into the cold veins of a recently lynched

gentleman, her work was interrupted by a sudden delivery of three bodies at one time.

Belinda had always been a bit saddened when one of her own boarders was brought into her undertaking location. She knew that she could make more money, in the long run, out of a living boarder. Alive, he paid for many meals; dead, all she got was one last fee. She was vastly affected, then, when she saw that all three of the new and very dead arrivals were from her boarding house.

The town constable, who had brought the bodies to her, explained that there had been a free-for-all in the boarding house.

"That revolvin' table of yours caused th' trouble," he said. "It seems that Caleb Snell shouted up to somebody to send around th' soup. It was slow in comin' around, so Caleb gave th' table a quick whirl. Well, as it spun around, th' platters all flew off—every which way. Seems like everybody got a lapful, or faceful, of hot soup, mashed spuds, or cream pie. One thing led to another, and they was a general free-for-all. Guns came into th' play —an' when th' smoke an' dust died down, these three gents was plumb dead."

Caleb Snell, the culprit who had started the melee, was one of the three ex-boarders. In preparing him for his funeral, Belinda first patched up the bullet hole over his heart, then, wiping his face, she muttered, "Well, Caleb. You wanted th' soup, pronto, an' you sure got it!"

Belinda did the best work of her undertaking career in preparing her three former customers for burial. When she had fixed them up and placed them, side by side, on a flower-banked platform, she wiped a tear from her eye.

"Boys," she said. "I feel turrible about this. You died because I wanted to do two jobs at once. But I've learned my lesson; nobody can serve th' livin' and th' dead at th' same time."

It was a mite too late for the trio of cadavers to agree with her.

What Happens When An Umpire Changes His Call?

don't miss

REVERSE THAT DECISION!

by

Bill Erin

Look for the September issue — on sale July 1st

ALL SPORTS

DAY OF THE LONGHORN

Many cow outfits were attacked by rivals on the trail.

TRUE FACT ARTICLE

BY MAT RAND

IF IT HAD not been for the Texas Longhorn Steer the Cattle industry would never have been born. Nor would have that Knight on Horseback, the American Cowboy.

When the Texans returned home from the Civil War, they found thousands and thousands of longhorns scattered over the ranges which were called "mavericks."

During the war most of the Texans were busy fighting the

"Damnyanks," as they termed all people who were on the Union side. Their women had let their spreads run down. Cattle had not been branded; they had been allowed their liberty by roaming over the ranges. They multiplied fast. When the Texans arrived home from the Civil War they found their cattle as wild as the wildest deer. Most of them had never seen a human being.

"What will we do with all these steers?" Texans said. Millions of cattle and no market for them. Nice thick beefsteaks were a regular diet on the tables of the poor; it was about this time that the Skinning War commenced. However, before that time, anyone was liable to take a hide off of a dead cow they found.

During the Skinning War everybody went skinning crazy. That is, they killed cattle for the small price of what their hides would bring.

Factories sprang up, most of them on the Gulf Coast. They specialized in hides and tallow and salted beef. The boom was on, and everybody from a four year old boy was up to his neck in blood from slaughtering and killing the longhorn. Soon the ranges began to stink from rotting carcasses.

Gangs of men with pack animals and ox carts to transport their hides to market went into the brush country of South Texas and chased the longhorn down. These outfits spread from the Rio Grande to the Sabine. It was a terrible sight. Nesters who had settled there who barely made a living looked forward to the time when they could pick up a little extra money from the hide crop.

But not all the stockmen turned toward the skinning business. Some turned toward the north to make a stab at the northern markets for cattle. Many trail-herds were seen going up the traill, soon after the war. Courageous trail-drivers were willing to stake their ranches that the northern markets would pay better then the Gulf outlet and they would not have the trouble skinning their cattle.

It was in the spring of 1866, that thousands of cattle were seen crossing the Red River into Kansas. Figures as given in the Tenth United States census, of 1880, estimated the amazingly large number of cattle driven over the northern route trails from the Southwest. The census reports that in 1886, 260,000 head of cattle were driven to Sadalia, Missouri. To Abilene, Kansas, as follows: In 1867, 35,000 head; in 1868, 75,000 head; in 1869, 350,000 head; in 1870, 300,000 head; in 1871, 700,000 head. This is a total of 1,460,000 head of cattle driven to Abilene in five years.

To Wichita, and Ellsworth, Kansas, the census reports as follows: in 1872, 350,000 head; in 1873, 405,000 head; in 1874, 166,000 head; in 1875, 151,618 head. A total of 1,072,618 head of cattle were driven up the trail to Ellsworth and Wichita, Kansas in four years.

To Dodge City, Caldwell, and Hunneville, Kansas: In 1880, 384,417 head. This grand total of cattle drives to shipping points amounts to 4,222,497. Besides there were other shipping points that I have not mentioned. Some were driven into New Mexico and Colorado over the Goodnight-Loving Trail and the Mackenzie Trail.

A. Anderson, general superintendent of the Kansas-Pacific Railroad, said that shipments of cattle on the roads were as follows: In 1867, 30,000 head; in 1868, 57,000 head; in 1869, 47,000 head; and in 1870, 125,000 head. He estimated that ninety-eight percent of these were Texas cattle.

IT WILL be observed that in the years 1867, 1868, 1874, and 1875, the falling off in the numbers of cattle driven up the trail. The Indian troubles of that period caused this decrease in the numbers driven up the trail.

Trail drivers ran into considerable trouble in the "Nations" or "Indian Territory" with the redman and also white outlaws. There they found that outlaws had set up gates and fenced up waterholes on the trail so that the drivers would have to pay toll or go back. Some of the drivers would not pay toll or they would not turn

[*Turn To Page* 124]

The Saving of Century John

by Ward Raymond

The situation called for a miracle—not just a plain, everyday miracle, but a real rarin' whopper of a miracle!

FOR A GENT who feels he's due to cash in his chips in the near future, Century John's rightdown chipper. Three hours, now, we've been settin' with him in Clancey's *Black Eagle* saloon, helpin' him dispose of his worldly goods; he's buyin' for everybody, and the best the house has to offer. Fer the sixth time, Clancey comes over with refills, and says, "Look, Century, we've all knowed yuh fer years, an' we know there ain't a yeller bone in yér carcass; yuh got thuh rheumatiz, now, and yuh just caint match Hardtack Peters' draw. Yuh can ride out, an' nobody'll think thuh worse of yuh."

Century rubs his gray whiskers and shakes his head. "Nope," he says. "I run away onct, and I swore I'd never do it again, under whatever circumstances. Been ashamed of myself fer seventy years on that account."

"What happened," Clancey wants to know.

"It were in 1812," Century allows, "an' I was with Gen'r'l Hull at Detroit. The British come up t'thuh fort, an' Hull surrenders. Bein' off m'feed that day, I goes along with thuh gen'r'l, stead of standin' my ground an' fightin', like I did at Bunker Hill when thuh ammunition run out. No excuse fer it though," he adds, shakin' his head; "no excuse at all."

"Don't see as how it were any fault o' yourn," says Clancey. "Thuh gen'r'l were in command, an' he done thuh surrenderin'; yuh had t'follow orders."

"No excuse," repeats Century, downing his drink. "Fer months afterward, I'd see my departed friends, who was with me on the Mayflower when we come over from England, shakin' their heads at me fer a coward—an' they was right, too. I shoulda fought it out—but I was still pretty much of a greenhorn button, an' I reckon life looked pretty sweet to me then."

"How old was yuh then," someone else wants to know.

"Yuh mean when I come to Americy, or when I disgraced myself? Wal, I reckon as how I was eight or nine when m' folks went t'Holland, an' we was there fer quite a spell; musta been about forty when we finally got here in thuh New World, so I reckon I just musta hit two hunnerd an' eight, there at Detroit. I'd be right chipper today, gents, but losin' one's self-respect makes a man age fast."

Clancey glances around the room, an' we all nod. Century John's been talkin' like this ever since he rode in, ten-eleven year ago, an' we're used to it; always good for an interestin' yarn, is Century, an' none of us likes the idea of his stoppin' lead at so tender an age like he allows for. "I heered o' gents what was long-lived, Century, but yuh take thuh prize. Tuh what d'yuh attribute your success in stayin' alive?"

We've all heard this before, but it's good for a chuckle every time.

"Like I done told yuh," Century answers patient-like, "there ain't no reason fer a man tuh exist only a mere sixty tuh seventy year, barrin' accidents an' violent ends. Folks grow old, then they ups and kicks thuh bucket, because they figger that's expected of 'em, an' they

hasn't much tuh live long fer anyways. Just ain't put their minds tuh it, really t'get enjoyment out of livin'. Don't blame 'em none; I sorta lost heart back in 1812, an' I reckon I just about cut my life-expectancy down tuh half.

"Some of my folks was really long-lived. Take my uncle, fer example. He finally got hisself blowed tuh pieces fightin' against the Spanish Armada—an' a lot of us have just been in thuh way when there was heavy fightin' goin' on—we just couldn't resist a good scrap. Uncle was used t'fightin' heavy armor against knights on horseback, an' he was too dang sot in his ways. Yuh couldn't tell him that this here gunpowder stuff was really dangerous t'be on the wrong end of. My father pounded that intuh my head proper; I learned tuh change m'viewpoint with thuh times. That's why I never got caught runnin' against heavy artillery, like they never had when I was a youngster, with shells thet explode when they hit thuh ground and fly in all directions. Shucks, cannon-balls, in my father's time wouldn't hurt yuh unless they hit yuh direct."

Century breaks off an' looks up as the batwing doors open an' the parson comes in.

"John," he says, "I've heard about your duel, and they tell me you are determined to go through with it."

Century nods his head. "Reckon I am, parson."

The Parson sets hisself down in a chair. "We've known each other a long time, haven't we John?"

Century allows as how this is true, considerin' what a young man the parson is.

"And I've never brought any great pressure on you to change your ways, have I?"

Century admits that the parson has been rightdown tolerant.

"Then," the parson says, "I merely want to ask one last favor of you, John." He lays his hand on Century's arm. "Give the gospel one more try, John. Come to the revival meeting. I promise we won't embarass you; just come and listen, and if we can't convince you, then that will be that."

Century pours hisself a drink. "Like I've told yuh before, Parson, I've been exposed tuh salvation fer a long time—quite a long time—an' I admit there's a lot tuh be said fer it. I supported thuh church in my time, but I just don't quite see it. I'd shore like tuh believe in thuh hereafter, but—well, no one's showed me. Iff'n what thuh Good Book says is true, then yuh oughter be able tuh produce somethin' in thuh way o' evidence.

"Thuh Book tells us how the Lord showed hisself tuh a lot o' men an' wimmin, an' how them as had faith did wunnerful things. But I ain't never seen nothin' o' this. Seems tuh me that iff'n yore on thuh right track, then yuh oughter be able tuh do some of tuh things that thuh Books tells about them oldtime prophets doin'."

The parson nods. "I know, John. That is a sore problem at times, and sometimes I wonder, myself, if my faith isn't something less than it should be."

He pauses as Hardtack Peters busts in. "Century," calls out Hardtack. "I'm ready for yuh anytime yore ready."

Century John gets out of his chair. "I'm goin' out tuh thuh revival, Peters; goin' tuh give thuh salvation gents one last crack at me. Iff'n they convince me, reckon maybe I'll be inclined tuh have mercy on yuh, but iff'n they don't, yuh better have yore affairs in order. Yuh can look me up at sundown if yuh like."

Hardtack looks at Century, with his rheumatic hands, and laughs, then bellies up to the bar as Century John and the parson go out. "Gimme a bottle," he says; "goin' tuh have myself a snort and a snooze before I salt down that blowhard. Three hundred years is long enough fer anyone tuh live, I always says, an iff'n he won't die proper, it's thuh duty of honest citizens like me tuh help him along."

I catch Clancey's eyes as Hardtack takes his bottle, pays for it, then ambles upstairs to the room he rents here when he's in town, and me and the *Black Eagle* proprietor puts our heads together.

SEEMS LIKE just about half the country's out in the hills where this here revival's takin' place, and they have a bonfire goin' when Clancey and me arrive there. We search out Century John and ask him what's up.

"Yore just in time," he says. "They're startin' thuh show now." He points out a lanky-lookin' circuit rider. "See that gent there? He's goin' tuh walk on red-hot stones, plumb barefoot."

We gets closer to the bonfire, close enough to see that them stones in there is plenty hot. As we move back, a gent takes a long pole and starts to poke them out of the flame. The lanky gent has taken off his shoes and is now rollin' up his pants legs. He stands up now and faces the crowd.

"Will the bretheren satisfy themselves that these stones are truly hellish hot?" he inquires.

A couple of characters come forward and look. One of 'em spits on the rocks, and jumps back as the saliva virtually explodes back in his face. Century John goes up and puts his hands half an inch away from the stones; he shakes his head. "Brother," he says to the lanky gent, "I shore hope yuh got lineament an' bandages an' somethin' strong tuh ease thuh pain."

The other shakes his head slowly. "Nay, good brother," he says. "I speak not in pride, nor do I claim that, by any power of my own, may I undergo this ordeal without hurt. But I say unto you, and to all of you, that if your faith be sufficient, then you may do even as I do; the Lord shall be with you, and no suffering shall come unto you. Thus was it written, and thus did men in days agone when faith was great."

He bows his head and prays briefly, then lifts it, and you'd think he was about to step into a cool stream an' go wadin'. I look at Clancey, an' he's sweatin'; he takes a swig from his bottle, and passes it to me. "Let's fortify ourselves, just in case thuh brother's a mite short of faith."

The lanky gent is now walkin' toward the pile of red-hot stones, an' the silence is somethin' overpowerin'. There's a gasp all around as he puts a bare foot firm on the first stone, then brings his other foot forward and is steppin' on a second. He stands there a moment, while we all gasp, then jumps lightly to the center of the pile which is the hottest. His pants legs slip down and begins to smoulder; he reaches down and pulls it up again.

"The Lord has said, *'The things that I do, ye shall do also'*," he intones. "Oh my bretheren, what you have seen is but a simple thing; for by faith, even so sinful a man as I can do this by the Lord's will, that others may be brought to Him. And I say unto you, let your hearts be opened by that which your eyes have seen."

He steps down off the stones, and walks back toward us, lifting up his feet so that we can see they ain't even blistered.

Century John shakes his head. "That's a rightdown fine performance," he says, "but when I was seafarin'—right after the Revolutionary War—I seen heathen witch-doctors walk around in fire."

The next wonder-worker steps up and drinks a bottle of poison, then washes it down with a full quart of whiskey. He tilts up the liquor and drinks it down without stoppin' for breath, then tosses it aside and delivers a short sermon on the evils of drink, without his speech blurrin', or showin' any sign of drunkeness.

"The love of liquor is a curse," he says, "and he who indulges for pleasure, and without faith, shall become drunken. But, I, bretheren, abominate whiskey; nor will I touch the vile potion except for medical purposes, or when, with the Lord's help, I would bring sinners unto Him, that they be saved."

"That was thuh strongest rotgut I've ever seen or heard of," says Clancey. "Knew a gent once who bet he could drink a quart of it. He drank it, all right—took him quite a spell—and they buried him the next day."

"Believe in moderation, myself," says Century John. "That wasn't a bad demonstration—not bad a-tall. But my uncle could drink two quarts without showin' any ill ef-

fects, and he didn't go fer salvation nohow."

The parson goes over to some of the other skypilots and talks to 'em briefly, nodding his head in the direction of Century John. They confab for awhile, then a bearded revivalist comes forward with a sack. He reaches his hand in and takes it out, and a gasp goes up from the crowd, because there's a rattler with its fangs sunk into the man's wrist.

He pries the reptile's jaws apart, grabs it by the tail, then swings it free so it can strike at him again. It bites him twice in the legs, then in his arms, and finally he lets the snake sink its jaws into his neck.

The revivalist pays no more attention than if it were a friendly pup licking him; he doesn't even bother to wipe away the blood. He goes into his talk about faith. By this time, the crowd is just plumb dazzled, and there's some already beginnin' to get down on their knees and pray.

A passel of the other wonder-workers come over to Century John, now, the parson amongst them.

"Gents," says Century John, "that was right good, but I reckon I'm just a doubtin' Thomas. I seen things like this before, and I'm not belittlin' what yuh did; but I seen people which didn't have no faith at all do just as good."

He bites off a chew of plug and spits. "Yuh know, the Good Book says somethin' about them as havin' real faith in the Lord bein' able tuh work miracles. Now iff'n one of yuh could perform a miracle, then I reckon that'd really prove somethin' tuh me."

That starts an argument, Clancey and some others claimin' that they have just witnessed miracles, and the discourse begins tuh get heated. But before any tempers can be lost, Century John holds up his hands and says, "Brothers, I'd sure admire tuh be converted, but I got tuh be convinced. Now I never seed anybody raise a man from thuh dead, and I reckon that would be a real miracle. Iff'n one of yuh could do that, then I'd believe yuh really knew what yuh was talkin' about when yuh claim to be in touch with thuh Lord, direct."

There's a buzz of confabbing now, and the others who've heard it tend to agree, on consideration, that Century John has something there. Tain't a question of whether the Lord exists or not; we all believes that; but Century John, and a number of others, ain't ready to admit that these here skypilots really have an inside track to salvation, and that their prescriptions fer the hereafter are any better than anyone else's.

It's about then that a short, sort of baby-faced gent comes forward. He's grinnin' in a sort of likeable way. "Brothers," he says quiet-like, "I haven't been ordained as long as the rest of you, and I may not have saved as many sinners as any of you, but I'd shore admire to try my faith if it's agreeable to you."

The lanky one, who walked through the hot stones, looks at him, sort of scowls, then shrugs. "Lord forgive me if I doubt thee, brother, but do you really believe you can raise the dead?"

The little man nods. "'*With faith,*'" he quotes, "'*ye shall move mountains.*' Don't see much use in shifting mountains around, but bringing back the dead seems pretty much to the point."

"Well, Brother Lister," says the parson, "let us proceed to Boothill cemetery, and my prayers, and the prayers of all of us, shall be with you."

SO WE TROMPS over to Boothill, and Lister, he looks around at the markers, most of which don't have full names on 'em. Dang few of the departed planted here was known by other than first names, or nicknames; them was the days when gents carried the law on their hips, and the one that shot second usually didn't have time to tell folks his full name.

Lister stops by a lopsided marker, with the name "Clem" on it and says softly. "Who lies here?"

Clancey, who's been here near since the town was founded, ups and says, "Why, that would be Clem, thuh bronco-stomper. He got caught in a stampede and his hoss throwed him, it did. Reckon it was thuh first —and shurely thuh last—time Clem

ever got thrown off'n his mount."

"Then," says Lister, "if the Lord permits, we shall bring Clem back, even as Lazarus was summoned, as the Book relates."

There's plenty of jawin' at this, for no one here except Clancey ever set eyes on this here Clem. The saloon-man says, "I recollect Clem well enough. He were a middle-size, red-headed feller with a scar on his right cheek. Didn't look like much, an' yuh wouldn't think he could set on a hoss proper until yuh saw him work. But I've seen Clem ride hosses yuh'd swear couldn't be busted never. Sure. I'd know Clem if he come back." Clancey's sweatin' a little at the thought of it, though.

Lister lifts up his hands and calls for quiet, then he gets down on his knees and bows his head. He prays right silent for a moment, then calls out. *"Clem, come forth!"*

We look and we listen, and there's a low moaning sound that seems to come from down below the ground.

Lister looks pale; then he bows his head and prays again, and we try to think of a few prayers ourselves, because this is sudden-like gettin' rightdown scary. Seems even more weird takin' place here in the daylight, then it would iff'n it was happenin' on a dark night, with the wind howlin' and anythin' likely tuh be afoot.

Brother Lister's voice comes out again, a little more clear and authoritative, *"Clem, arise and come forth!"*

We wait, and I feels a crawlin' sensation all up and down my back. Seems like there's a cold wind blowin' all around us, though there's no dust stirrin' and the sun's still beatin' down heavy on all of us.

And there's that sound again, only it's louder, like a man moanin' and groanin' in torment. There's no doubt but that everybody's heard it, and the parson, he's swallowin' and lookin' as shaken as the rest of us. The gent who walked through the hot stones is holdin' on to his nearest brother's arm, and the gent what downed the poison and a quart of whisky staggers a little and is sneakin' in a snort from another bottle. We hear another sound, like somethin' fallin' heavy, but it's just the brother who let that snake bite him. He's fainted.

Now Brother Lister is really bowed down, and his lips is movin' an' I can see sweat streamin' down his face like water was just pourin' over him. Never seen anyone pray like that, and make no sound; I reckon what he's prayin' is somethin' no one but him and the Lord oughter hear.

Now he rises to his feet before the marker and lifts his arms and calls out in deep, ringing tones, *"Clem, in the name of the Lord, rise up and show yourself to us."*

And an instant later there's a moan, and a wail, and a shriek like someone's been hit with a hot brandin' iron. Then, out of the ground comes a hollow voice, and we hear it sayin', *"Oooooooh, can't yuh let a man rest in peace?"*

That's when Century John shouts out, "Hallelujah! I've seen the glory!" He runs up and throws his arms around Brother Lister and says, "You've done it! All my life I wanted to believe, but I just couldn't. But now I've seen and I've heard and I repent my doubt."

And Century John gets down on his knees t'be baptised right then and there.

WELL, THERE'S a whoopin' and a hollerin' the like you never dreamt of, and everybody who hasn't been saved repents and confesses his sins, and them as has been saved goes through the whole process again just t'be sure. There's psalm-singing and a collection taken up for the parson and his church, and some dang fools pledge to donate their next month's pay t'charity—me bein' one of em.

Brother Lister, he joins in the festivities, but somehow he looks downright sorrowful. We're all so carried away, we don't notice thuh sun goin' down, and don't think nothin' of it anyhow, until we hears a familiar voice and looks around to see Hardtack Peters close by.

"Fill yore hand, Century John," he bellows, "or tuck yore tail between yore legs and git!"

Century, who's baptismal dousing

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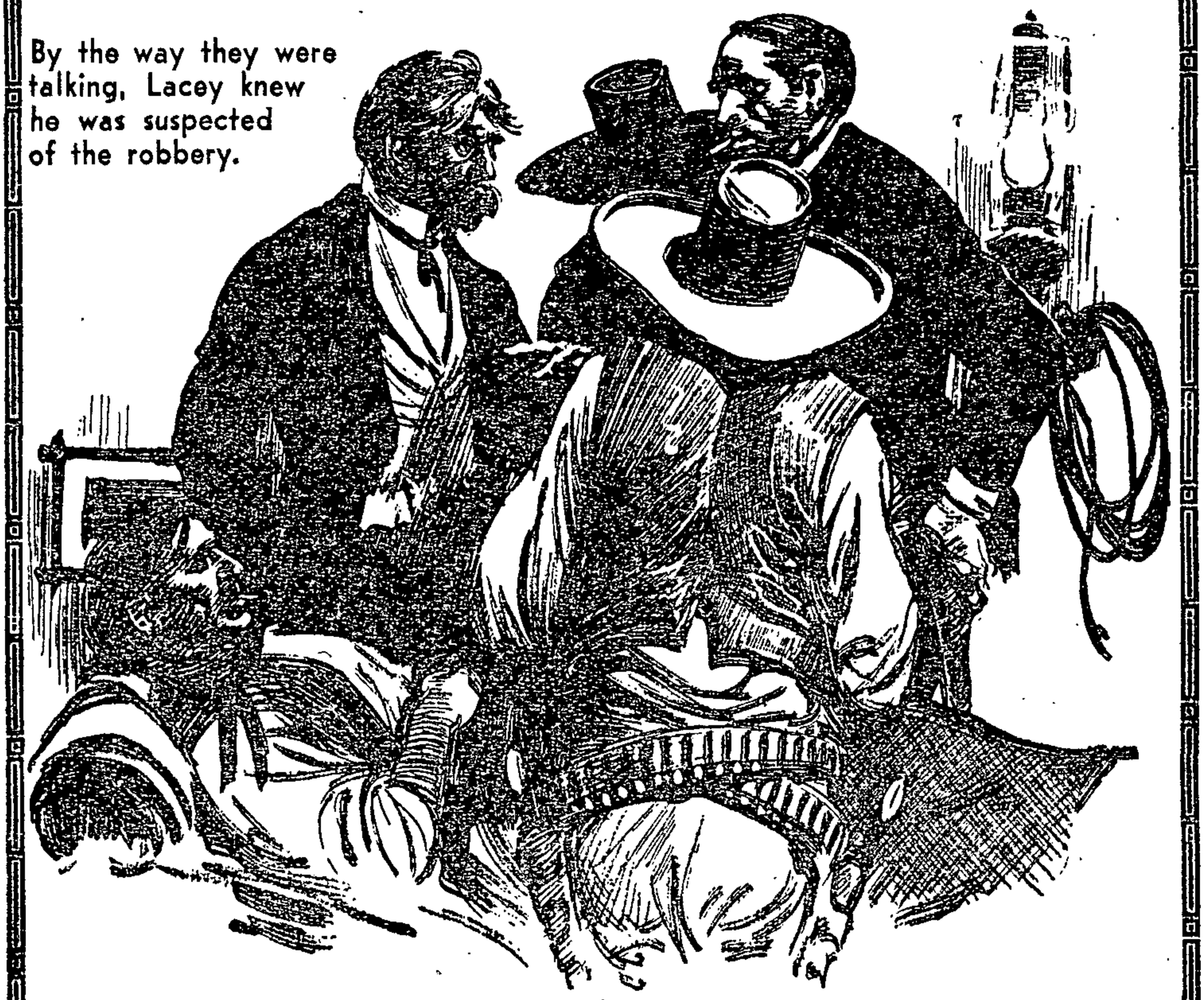
THE RESTLESS DUST

By Charles Ackeley



HIS SHOULDERS slumped over the counter in the Aspen Restaurant, his black hat shoved back on his bandaged head, Troy Lacey sat looking unseeingly at the steak the girl had placed before him. He was drawing rings on the counter with the bottom of his water glass while he listened to the four men at the table back of him. The talk was about the robbery and about him.

The girl came up, looked at his untouched food and asked, "What's the matter? Something wrong with it?"

Lacey did not hear her; he was already off the stool and across the room. The sandy-haired man looked up at him standing angrily beside the table, and asked, "Want to see me about anything?"

"Yes, Costigan," Lacey answered tightly. "I told you how, when, and

"Yeah, maybe I have an idea of who robbed the freight load, and how it was done, but everyone's ready to believe that I did it myself. So the hell with them all; let 'em go broke for all I care—they've got it coming to them!"

where I lost that load of freight for you. You can believe me or not; that's your business. But when you start saying that it was probably my brother who stole the gold dust, that I was probably in on it, and that I lied about what happened, then you'd better get up and defend yourself. I'm going to make you wish you hadn't said a thing like that."

Costigan, manager of the stage and freight line, was coldly arrogant. "When the brother of a known high-grader starts out with a load containing forty-thousand dollars worth of gold and not only fails to get through with it, but even lies about how the robbery took place, I don't think I'm out of turn in expressing my opinion about the matter. Do you know that this last robbery will just about finish our business?"

"I don't care whether your stage line goes broke, and I warned you once about calling me a liar. Now get out of that chair or I'll drag you out of it."

Costigan's mouth tightened. He laid his cigar carefully on the red-checked tablecloth and got to his feet. "You shouldn't have been allowed to stay in this town a day after they found that gold down on the creek," he said. "And now I'm going to do what the decent citizens should have done then; I'm going to drive you out, myself."

Lacey's blow reached the stage agent's cheek before the man had ceased talking. Costigan stumbled back until the table caught him. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, licking his lips. Then the rage in him exploded into action; the force of his forward momentum drove Lacey backward before his flying fists. Costigan was a big man, and his blows had the power in them to hurt.

Lacey made his stand near the cash register just inside the front door and met Costigan's stinging blows with more of his own. Costigan came in and got him around the waist, trying to throw him to the floor.

Lacey got his hand cupped under Costigan's chin finally and shoved the face away far enough to enable him to drive his fist into it. The blow knocked Costigan through the screen door and out onto the sidewalk, while Lacey followed him out.

The restaurant was in an uproar. The bareheaded manager was out on the walk shouting to Sheriff Woodford who was just riding up in a party of half a dozen sweaty men. Woodford got off his horse and pushed his way through the growing crowd in time to keep Lacey from knocking Costigan out into the dust of the street.

"That'll be enough, Troy," the sheriff said, placing his two big hands on Lacey's chest and pushing him backward. "What's the matter with you anyway?"

Costigan's fury was not all spent, and he was shouting at the sheriff before Lacey had a chance to answer the question. "I'll tell you what's the matter with him. He's gone crazy, killing crazy. He hit me without excuse while I was sitting down talking to my friends. Ask 'em; he came over to our table and started a quarrel, then hit me. I only defended myself. Ask anybody."

All the diners were out on the walk now, bareheaded, the more fastidious ones with their napkins still under their chins. The sheriff threw a questioning look at the men, and none of them spoke up, either for Lacey or for Costigan. Some of them looked uncomfortable, but held their tongues.

THE SHERIFF was a heavy man, deliberate in thought and action. He fingered his fine mustache thoughtfully for a moment. He gave a brief glance at Costigan, who was brushing his clothes with his hands, then making up his mind, turned to Lacey. "Come on and take a walk with me, Troy; I wanted to have a talk with you, anyway."

His statement seemed aimed at telling the crowd that he was not putting Lacey under arrest.

Lacey waited while Woodford had a word with the possemen, and then

the pair of them walked down the street, Woodford leading his horse.

Lacey felt the eyes of loungers following them, but his pride would not let him show any sign of his knowing what they were thinking. They had walked some distance in silence when Lacey felt his patience give way. "Well, you didn't find the thieves, did you?"

"No, you couldn't find a man on Pinetop mountain with an army," the officer answered; "we couldn't even find their trail."

"Of course not," Lacey answered dryly. "They weren't at Pinetop; I told you that."

"I know you did," the sheriff admitted tiredly. "But that's where the robbery took place. That's where they found Shorty's body and the wagon and team, and that's where they found you lying unconscious in the brush."

Lacey shrugged and was silent. Woodford studied him carefully. Then he added. "Well, wasn't it?"

Lacey shrugged again, and did not answer.

They reached the little white house which was Woodford's home, and stabled the horse, Woodford lost in thought for a long time. "I wanted you to have supper with me," he finally said as they came out of the lot gate. "You haven't eaten, have you?"

"I've got my supper waiting down at the restaurant." Lacey answered; "I'll just go on back and finish it."

"We've got catfish for supper. Costigan caught 'em up at my cabin on Pecan. If you don't mind eating fish he caught. What were you and him fighting about, anyway?"

"Costigan still doesn't believe what I told him about the robbery. He was telling them that I lied about it."

"I just wanted to go over it again with you," Woodford said mildly. "There might have been something significant that you forgot; after all, you were pretty well banged up."

"I've told my story," Lacey repeated. "There's not anything to add."

"All right. I want you to tell me the same thing again," Woodford insisted. "Come on in. We'll wash up on the back porch while mama gets things on the table."

LACEY put up one more objection. "You didn't believe me this morning, so you won't believe me now. What's the use? You saw the place on Pinetop where they found me and the load, and you're satisfied that the robbery happened there."

"Yes I found that place," Woodford admitted. "But I wasn't completely satisfied. So, on the way home, I stopped off at the Pecan Creek crossing—where you said the robbery happened—and I found blood in the brush, and a lot of confused tracks. So, you might have been right; it might have happened at the Pecan Creek crossing like you say. I just want to find out," Woodford said with his quiet persistence.

"I told you where the robbery happened," Lacey answered doggedly.

"But why?" the old man countered. "If you was robbed on Pecan Creek, why did we find you on Pinetop Mountain, ten miles away? That don't make sense."

Lacey knew the answer to that, but he only shook his head. "That's a good question," he answered, as they hung their towels on the wall of the porch and went in to supper.

The warm friendliness of white-haired Mother Woodford thawed some of the cold bitterness out of Lacey, as it always had done when this kindly old couple had welcomed him. A man whose step-brother had made the family name notorious through a series of mad-dog bandit exploits could expect little friendliness and much suspicion in his home town, and when Eva, their granddaughter, had brought him in and introduced him, they had made him welcome. His visits here and his hours with Eva were the only bright spots in a life clouded by a bad name. Eva hadn't yet got home from her job at Bradley's Store, but the hope of having a word with her made him willing to stay when

Woodford invited him into the homely little plush parlor after supper.

The old man got comfortable in his chair and stuffed and lighted his pipe while Lacey rolled a cigarette. Then the old man said, "Well, let's go over it again, Troy. There's just something I don't see, here; I haven't got all the facts."

"You got my story," Lacey answered defensively.

The old man looked at him shrewdly. "All of it?"

"All there is to tell." The evasiveness of the answer was not lost on Woodford.

"All you know?"

"All I could prove."

"What is the part that you can't prove?"

Lacey tried to fence his way out of the corner Woodford's direct question had put him in. "When a man is a witness in a court," he answered thoughtfully, "they don't want hearsay, guesses, or rumor; they just want the facts as you know them. I've given you that. What my guess is, is—well—just a guess. And I'd rather not go into it."

THE SHERIFF shrugged wearily. "Then let's go over the facts. Three of Costigan's drivers have been killed during robberies of the freight wagons that they've been using to ship gold out of here. Shorty Madill, the last driver they had, quit yesterday. Costigan hired you to drive the load of freight to Westlake. You didn't know that he had hidden a forty-thousand dollar shipment of gold in one of those new fifty-pound lard cans."

"That's right. If I'd have known it, I either wouldn't have agreed to drive, or they'd have had to send a shotgun guard along with it. All I saw was a load of picks and shovels, some bags of beans, flour, and those two new yellow five-gallon lard cans still in their crates. You were there at the dock when I loaded that stuff onto the wagon."

"Yes," Woodford answered. "As a matter of fact, I took the two cans from his office and brought them to you at the wagon myself—just to make sure about them."

"You knew there was gold in one of them," Lacey said. "Why didn't you tell me, or have a gun guard go along?"

"Costigan wanted it kept secret; a guard along would merely have tipped off anybody that there was gold in that load. Now, what happened after you got started?"

"Costigan closed up the stage office—it was about sundown you remember—and he came along behind me in his buckboard. He was going fishing out at your cabin. He turned off at your road, and I drove on toward Westlake.

"Shorty Madill had had some words with Costigan about his quitting, and Costigan wouldn't let him ride the wagon over to Westlake. Well, a little while after Costigan had turned off, I found Shorty waiting by the road for me with his warbag, and I let him ride.

"It was about half an hour after dark when we came to the crossing of Pecan Creek. It's shallow there, and while we let the horses stand in the water and drink, Shorty and I climbed out to get a drink ourselves. That's when the man popped out of the woods—"

"One man only?" The officer asked.

"That's right. He wore a blue bandanna over his face and had a gun in his hand. I didn't have much chance to observe him very close, though. Shorty made a dash back to the wagon-seat for his rifle, and the man shot Shorty cold without a word.

"I was on my feet by that time and drawing my gun when he turned his gun on me. He must have beat me to the draw, because the next thing I remember it was daylight, and I was lying by the side of the road up on Pinetop Mountain; my head was covered with dried blood from this crease in my skull. I got up and milled around and saw Shorty lying dead on the ground on the other side of the wagon, the merchandise scattered around the road, and those two big yellow lard cans gone. It was

about that time that I saw a bunch of men coming from Westlake looking for me, and you know the rest."

"I know the rest," the old man said wearily, "and still I don't know anything. If that business happened at Pecan Creek, then why the devil weren't you found at Pecan Creek instead of way over on the other side of a mountain ten miles away?"

"That is a puzzle, for a fact," Lacey agreed, giving his attention to the twisting of a cigarette.

The old man watched him speculatively for a long moment, puffed his pipe furiously, then spoke.

"Troy," he said. "I've known you a long time, and I know by the way you're talking that you're holding out something. You know more than you're telling—"

"I've told you everything that happened, Sheriff."

"Then you've got something else on your mind. Either you think you know who did it—" The sheriff cut his words off short and his eyes searched Lacey's face. "Say, your brother is out of prison now. Could you—"

"I'm not protecting Alf," Lacey answered tightly. "In the first place Alf is not my brother; he's just the son of the man my mother married. He's a thief, and I don't care anything about him; but on the other hand, I wouldn't care if Alf stole every nickel in this town."

THE OLD man puffed his pipe thoughtfully. Then said, "Troy, I think you've got the wrong attitude. Let's admit that the town has kinda branded you as the brother of an outlaw. You're not like Alf, but people are the same everywhere. They don't think things out; they're easy led into a belief, and they don't like to admit they're wrong."

"Then why should I care what happens to their money? They want to act like they're too good to walk on the same sidewalk with me; why should I try to do anything for them?"

"Well," the old man observed. "People take you for what you want them to take you for. It's not altogether their fault. It's just your hard luck that you happened to been raised by Alf Lacey's father. And that's not your fault. But when people shied away from you, you got your back up at them; you've been that way for years, and so they have to keep on judging you by your actions. You act like you don't care a thing about your neighbors and they'll take the same attitude toward you."

"That suits me," Lacey answered. "I've been able to look out for myself without them; let them look out for themselves without me."

After a period of thought, the old man said in a not unkindly voice, "Troy, that tells me what I want to know. You know who took that gold, and you're not telling because you'll enjoy to see the owners lose it. Son, that will hurt you in the long run worse than it will hurt them."

"I didn't have any money tied up in that load," Lacey answered, getting to his feet. "It can't hurt me."

"Not in the pocketbook," the old man replied, tapping his chest. "But in here. A man can't ever be happy with bitterness inside him."

"Happy!" Lacey repeated. "I don't know what the word means; I'll be satisfied if people will just let me alone."

"And if you can see them hurt like you feel hurt," the old man added, going to the door with him. "Son, I still say you're wrong. Think it over, and if you change your mind, let me know; you could help us all on this, if you would."

"The owners of the stage line are paying to find that gold. They wouldn't believe what I told them, so let them find out in their own way what happens to it."

LACEY went on down to the store to pick up Eva after her day's work. There were few girls in town who worked, but Eva refused to sit at home and let her grandfather support her now as he had been doing since her mother and father had drowned in a flood on Pecan Creek in her infancy. There was independence and a will of her own behind

those slightly humorous blue eyes of hers, as Troy had learned during the years he had courted her.

Now as she stepped out of the store into the dusk, Lacey saw none of the carefree gaiety which usually was hers. Instead, she seemed troubled and remote.

They usually walked a while before he took her home, and now they went along the street which was as usual almost deserted in that hour between the day's activity of the businessmen and the night's activity of the prospectors who found their release in the saloons and at the gambling tables.

The silence built up between them until Lacey felt uncomfortable. "By the way," he said with ironical casualness, "I got shot in the head since I saw you last."

"Yes, I know."

"You don't seem to be interested much about it."

"Are you? I heard that it wasn't bad."

"I could have been killed."

"But you weren't."

"What is this?" Lacey demanded; "you act like your mind was a million miles away."

"It is."

"What are you thinking about?"

"About what is going to happen to this town because of the robbery. Do you know that there will be a lot of people hurt?"

"Sure. But what's that to us? It is not our money that's gone."

"It's theirs, and they'll be hurt. That is what worries me."

"Look," Lacey said. "Your granddad and I went all through that just a few minutes ago. You know how I feel about the people in this town, and why I feel like I do; let's forget them and talk about us."

"You don't realize, Troy," she said gravely, "that what affects them affects us. You can't live alone in your own shell like a fresh-water mussel, and just close your shell when something happens to your neighbors."

"Why can't I? If they hadn't held their noses up at me, then maybe I'd care what happens to them. But they did, so I don't."

"If you can't be neighbors to your neighbors, you ought to go to some place where you could be friendly."

"That's what I've been thinking for a long time," Lacey admitted. "And with this thing happening, this is the time to do it. Listen, Eva, we've put off facing this long enough; I know you wanted to get away to some other place, and I wanted to stay. I know now why I wasn't willing to go. It came to me while I was talking to the old man a while ago. I felt that folks in this town would like to see me gone, so I was just bullheaded enough to stay here just for spite. But that's not getting us anywhere; I'm willing now to call it off. We'll get married, and go somewhere else and settle down to making a home for ourselves. Now, we both want to go. Let's go."

"It's too late now," the girl said wearily. "I can't."

"Why not? What's keeping you from it?"

"This robbery."

"What's the robbery got to do with you?"

"Everything. I told you it would affect everybody. I heard this at the store today. The stage company has lost too much money in all these robberies; they're broke. Everybody will lose the money he put into it."

"And that is something I will not shed a tear over," Lacey said.

"I know it. But this is the way it is. They have given Granddad a week to find that missing gold, and if he doesn't, then he is out of a job. He and Granny took care of me until I was able to work. With him out of a job, the least I can do is to take care of them now. He's too old to start over."

"But he must have saved something to live on," Lacey argued. "He can get along somehow."

"Yes, he saved something. A few thousand dollars. That wasn't enough, he thought, so in order to increase it, he invested it in the stage line. Now, he'll have no job and no money. I can't walk out on them, Troy."

"You mean this robbery will cost him his job if he doesn't get that gold back?"

"His job and his savings. They won't have anything to live on."

LACEY SAID, "I didn't know that." His voice was completely subdued as they stood at the end of the road looking down on the lights winking in the open prairie below. "I just didn't know that he had anything more than a professional interest in the robbery." He was silent for a long moment.

The girl beside him said after a while. "Those lights are pretty, aren't they? This used to be a nice place to live, and it will be nice again when the prospectors are gone, and things get quiet like they used to be. I don't think it will be so bad staying here. After all, this is home to us."

"To you, yes," Lacey answered with a trace of the old bitterness.

"And to you, too. You complain that the people here don't like you, but you're wrong. Those that know you like you, but you haven't given very many people a chance to know you. That's your fault, not theirs."

"I'm not thinking about that now," Lacey said. "I'm thinking about your folks. They can't afford to lose everything they've got."

"I know, but it can't be helped."

"It can," Lacey said shortly. "Come on, I'm going to take you home. I've got a busy night ahead of me."

As they walked back, she asked, "What's on your mind all of a sudden?"

"I might be able to get that gold," he answered with a voice of suppressed excitement.

"Troy!" she exclaimed. "You know where that gold is? I couldn't believe it when they said you knew more than you were telling."

"I don't know where it is. I've had a good idea who pulled that robbery, but I couldn't have proved it in a million years, and I'd have just got laughed at if I'd told them what I thought. I don't know that I'm right; I just believe I am, and I've got no way to prove it. And if I can't prove it, I'd be better off keeping my mouth shut."

"Then you think you know who robbed you?"

"I think I wasn't robbed at all!"

"Troy! What do you mean?"

"Just guessing," he answered with a new lightness in his voice. "Now listen. When you go in, you tell the Sheriff to be out to his fishing cabin on Pecan Creek first thing in the morning. Tell him to bring all the men who are interested in the stage line."

"Do you expect to have the gold then?"

"I just hope I can give him the gold and the man that stole it. If I can't then I'd be better off getting out of the country. Now run on in and tell the Sheriff that, will you?"

●

THE LOG cabin sat on the bank of Pecan Creek at Catfish Hole, a long hole of still water in a woods of post oak and sweetgum and hic-

COMING NEXT ISSUE

Nobody's Neutral in Kansas

By Roe Richmond

kories. Underneath the solid canopy of trees the earth was a moist black carpet of leafmold, pitted here and there around the cabin with rough places where the Sheriff's friends had dug in the moist ground for fishing worms with which they caught perch and bream, which in turn they used to bait their trot-lines for the larger channel catfish which had given this quiet spot its name.

Now as the early morning light lanced down through the trees five men had left their horses in the clearing and were standing around where Troy Lacey sat on a stump. There was Bradley, who ran the general store; Kelsey, the saddle-maker; Costigan, the manager of the stage line; Lindstrom, the black-smith, and Sheriff Woodford.

Ordinarily men of business, the whole group now wore sixguns in heavy cartridge belts, and their faces were grim as they listened to Lacey talk, and as their eyes kept turning to the display on the ground in front of the stump on which Lacey sat.

There were two yellow fifty-pound lard cans in their light wooden crates. The crates were plastered with black mud, and were tied together with two short lengths of rope about a foot long.

Stacked up alongside the crates were a number of dirty Mason fruit jars, their zinc tops screwed tightly on—and each containing an amount of blackish yellow gold dust and nuggets.

The tension that ran through this little group on the bank of the creek was in heavy contrast with the light-hearted cries of the birds in the woods and the pertness of the wild violets that snuggled at the base of the big oaks.

Lacey was talking, and the men were weighing his words as carefully as the assayer would weigh this metal.

"We all use lard," Lacey said, "and we all remember that the lard came in blue cans until this last shipment when Mr. Bradley started buying his stock from a different company. Is that right, Mr. Bradley?"

Bradley was short, thick and abrupt, but an unmercifully honest man. His fingers ran through his spade beard and his heavy black eye-brows went up and down. "Yes. Yes. But what's that got to do with it? Those are the cans of lard that Costigan bought to hide the dust in; we'll all admit that. Where'd you get 'em?"

"Right there in the deep water back of you. I dived half an hour before I located them."

"And the gold was in them?" Bradley snapped. As the largest merchant in town, and as the mayor, he took the lead by common consent. "The question is, who stole them? That's the important thing, if we're to stop this business once and for all."

Lacey got to his feet and worked the friction lids off both cans. "Lard is poured into cans hot by the packers, and as it cools it shrinks. Anybody that's ever opened a can of lard knows what the surface looks like, and knows you couldn't disturb that evenly mounded surface without leaving marks on it. Is that right?"

It was Lindstrom who voiced the surprise of all of them. "Why that lard hasn't been disturbed; nothing could have been hidden in it. How come?"

Costigan, who hadn't spoken to Lacey, rubbed a bruise on his face. "It's clear enough. These weren't the cans the gold was hidden in. I put the gold in the lard, and like Lacey says, the surface was jagged, not smooth like it is in a new can. These are not the cans that you had in the wagon."

"I say they are!" Lacey answered evenly. "*And I say this is proof that the gold never was put into my wagon.* These cans were tied together and brought here on horseback and thrown into the creek to make it look as though robbers stole the gold from my wagon; the gold was never in these cans."

THERE WAS a stunned silence as the implication of this state-

ment bore in on them. Costigan saw it instantly, and gave a dry laugh. "You're trying to say that you weren't robbed; then where'd you get the gold?"

"Right," Lacey answered. "I'm saying that you told the sheriff and possibly Bradley that you were trying to sneak the gold out in the lard cans, but you didn't sneak it out. You had already stolen that gold and hidden it before I ever started with the wagon. Everybody knows that this gold strike isn't going to last, and you wanted to get yours while the getting was good. So you took the gold dust and hid it, then went through the motions of shipping it out. Then that night, you came out here to do some trot-line fishing. You set your lines, rode down to the creek to the crossing, and when I came along you shot me and Shorty.

"You figured that the best place to hide from the sheriff was right under his whiskers, and you didn't want him looking right under his nose for the thief. So you drove that wagon with Shorty's body and mine—you thought I was also dead—ten miles over to Pinetop Mountain, and set the stage over there, so the sheriff would naturally suspect the wild bunch that lived over there. Then you tied those ropes between those two lard cans and brought them back here horseback and dumped them in the deep hole. That would make it look as though the robber had stolen them both to get the gold in them. Then you spent the rest of the night under the sheriff's whiskers, catching him a mess of catfish."

"That's ridiculous. You're the one that came up with the gold. I asked you before, where'd you get it?"

"Right where you hid it. There's a hundred places here where people have been digging worms for bait. You took the shovel there in the shack and planted these jars of dust around here, knowing that nobody would pay any attention to a new spot where the earth had been

[*Turn Page*]

THE SAVING OF CENTURY JOHN

[*Continued From Page* 110]

hasn't dried yet, replies, "I'm still drippin' with redemption, friend, and I want no man's blood."

"Yuh'll draw, or I'll gut-shoot yuh where yuh stand," growls Hardtack, and there's no doubt he means what he says.

Brother Lister looks at Century John, and says, "Remember the Book, Brother: *thou shalt not kill!*"

"Thuh Book don't say a gent should stand up and let hisself be killed without raisin' a hand in self-defence, does it?" puts in Clancey.

"No," agrees Lister sadly, "It doesn't say that."

"I will remember," Century John says, and everyone clears a space. Clancey takes out his bandanna and says for both parties to draw and fire when he drops it. And the reverend gents all about look forlornly at Century John with his rheumatic hands, figgerin' their convert won't enjoy his redemption in this world much longer.

It seems an hour before Clancey drops his bandanna, then both men are going for their guns; but somethin's wrong. Hardtack's hand is on his holster first, and he's tuggin' away, but Century John completes his draw, for all his slowness. We hear the roar of Century John's .45 and see Hardtack's hand jerk away from his holster as a slug shatters it.

"As the Books says, *thou shalt not kill,*" remarks Century John.

●

Well, Hardtack will recover, although he'll never be very fast with a gun again, and his narrow escape has sort of changed his outlook on things; as soon as he's bandaged up, he takes to salvation, too.

We all find ourselves back at the

[*Turn Page*]

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THE SAVING OF CENTURY JOHN

Black Eagle that night, though the drinkin's light. Clancey comes over to me, and whispers, "Did yuh confess when yuh repented?"

"Nope," says I; "don't see that there was no sin in what we did."

"Hardtack might have been kilt," I replies. "But the way it worked out, puttin' glue in Hardtack's holster saved a killin' on both sides."

That there Brother Lister's thuh one what saved a killin', I reckon," says Clancey. "Century's a changed man; reckon he wouldn't have just disabled Hardtack if he hadn't been converted."

I look over at the corner, where the little circuit rider is sitting, lookin' downright forlorn. I goes over to him t' inquire why he's so downcast, seein' as how his performance had such a tellin' effect.

"I reckon I was too prideful," he says, shakin' his head. "Guess there was vanity instead of true faith in my heart."

"What are yuh talkin' about," I asks.

He looks at me, an' danged if there ain't tears in his eyes. "I let yuh down, brother," he says. "I let yuh all down. I promised a miracle, but I just couldn't deliver." He shakes his head. "It could have been a great revival, but my faith was not sufficient. No miracle!"

turned; they'd figure they was just more places where somebody dug worms. I just dug under that loose earth and brought out the jars. The rest of you men can see the imprints where I picked up the jars."

Costigan turned to Bradley. "That's the gold, all right, but the fact that he has got it doesn't prove I took it. The man's completely crazy; chances are he bought a can of lard himself, and switched cans on us. Then he could have done all the things he accuses me of doing."

"I did sell you a new can of lard recently," Bradley said, combing his beard with his fingers. "It looks to me like we've got it narrowed down to you or him. Personally, it looks to me like either one of you could have done it. What about you, Sheriff?"

"What Troy says makes sense, but like you say, he could have done most of the things he's accusing Costigan of. Either one of the two of them could have done it, from what I see."

"Even if the gold had been hidden here as Lacey says, he could have been the one who hid it." Costigan charged.

"I couldn't have got those jars. Those are the jars the prospectors freight their dust to you in. You keep the dust in the jars when you buy it; those jars came from your office."

"How can you tell one fruit jar or mayonnaise jar from another?" Costigan asked scornfully.

"By the lids. A lot of prospectors take that piece of opal glass out of the lid, scratch their initials on the underside of the zinc, and then put the glass back in the lid. Kind of secret mark. You'll find some of the names and initials of men who sold you that gold, right on the underside of the lids. I couldn't have ever had my hands on those jars before I found them here where you hid them."

TROY TURNED a grave face on the rest of the party. "You men agree with Bradley and the sheriff that either Costigan or I did the

[*Turn To Page* 122]

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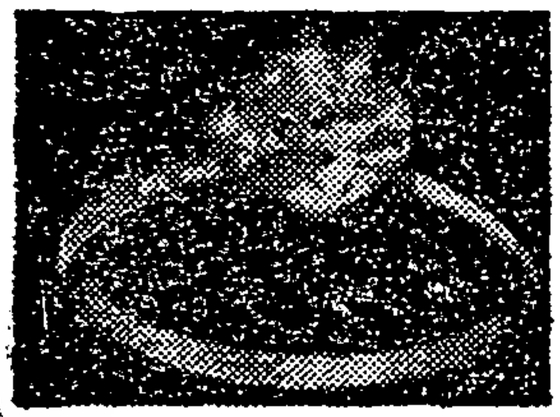

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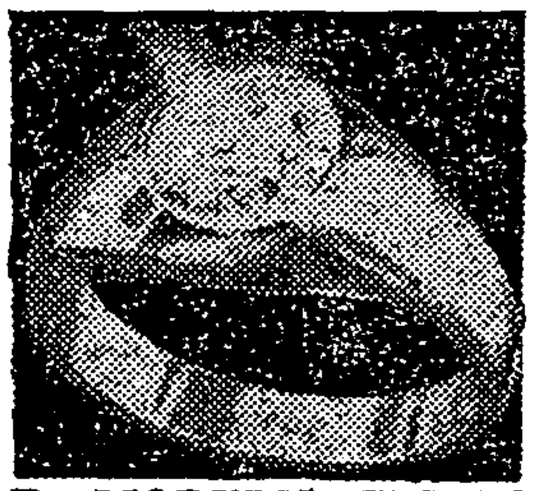

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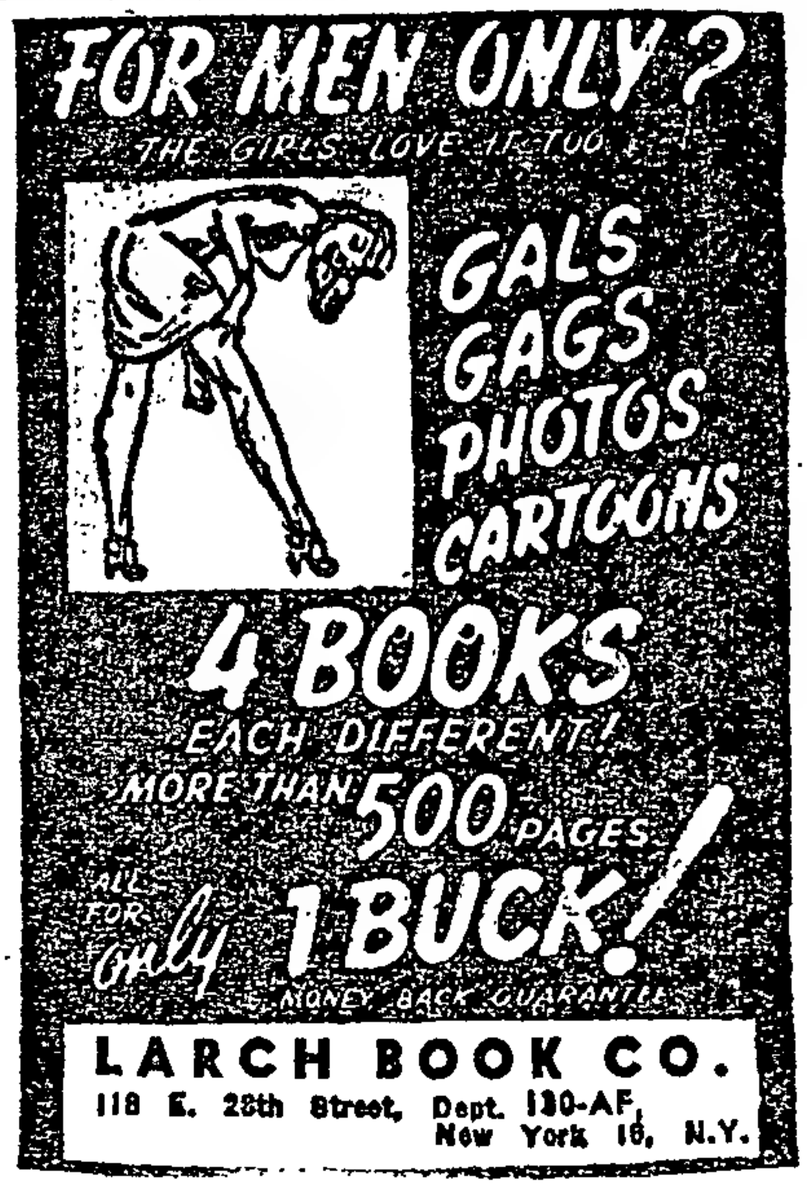

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stealing?" They all seemed to be of the same mind.

"All right," Lacey answered. "This is the rest of my story and you'll have to take it or leave it. First, I told you I was down on my hands and knees drinking out of the creek when the shooting started. I said I didn't recognize the man because he wore a mask. But I did see a white stocking on the left front foot of the bay horse the killer was riding. That describes Costigan's horse, standing right over there. Also, if Costigan rode from here down to the crossing, he'd have to cross some damp ground. Lindstrom probably shod his horse for him; he can check on the tracks."

"I could have ridden the creek bank for any number of reasons," Costigan interjected.

"Wait till I get through," Lacey snapped. "Sheriff, remember that you helped load those lard cans?"

"Yes. I brought them out from Costigan's office to the wagon."

"Anything unusual about them?"

"Nothing that I remember."

"How much was Costigan paying for dust?"

"Thirty dollars an ounce."

"Three-hundred-and-sixty dollars a Troy pound. The lard in one of those cans weigh about forty pounds. The forty-thousand dollars in gold he claims he hid in one of those lard cans would weigh more than a hundred and ten pounds. You lifted those cans. Did either of them weigh that much?"

"Why, no. Positively—"

"Then the gold never left the stage station in those cans—"

"Hey—watch him!"

It was Lindstrom who shouted. Lacey saw that Costigan had reached his horse and was already in his saddle and drawing his gun. The man's face was a mask of hatred, and his eyes were on Lacey as his weapon came up and spoke.

Lacey was a little slow getting his gun out. Costigan's bullet caught him in the shoulder and spun him around, knocking him to the ground. Lacey rolled over with one motion, lifted himself to hands and knees, and

[*Turn To Page* 124]

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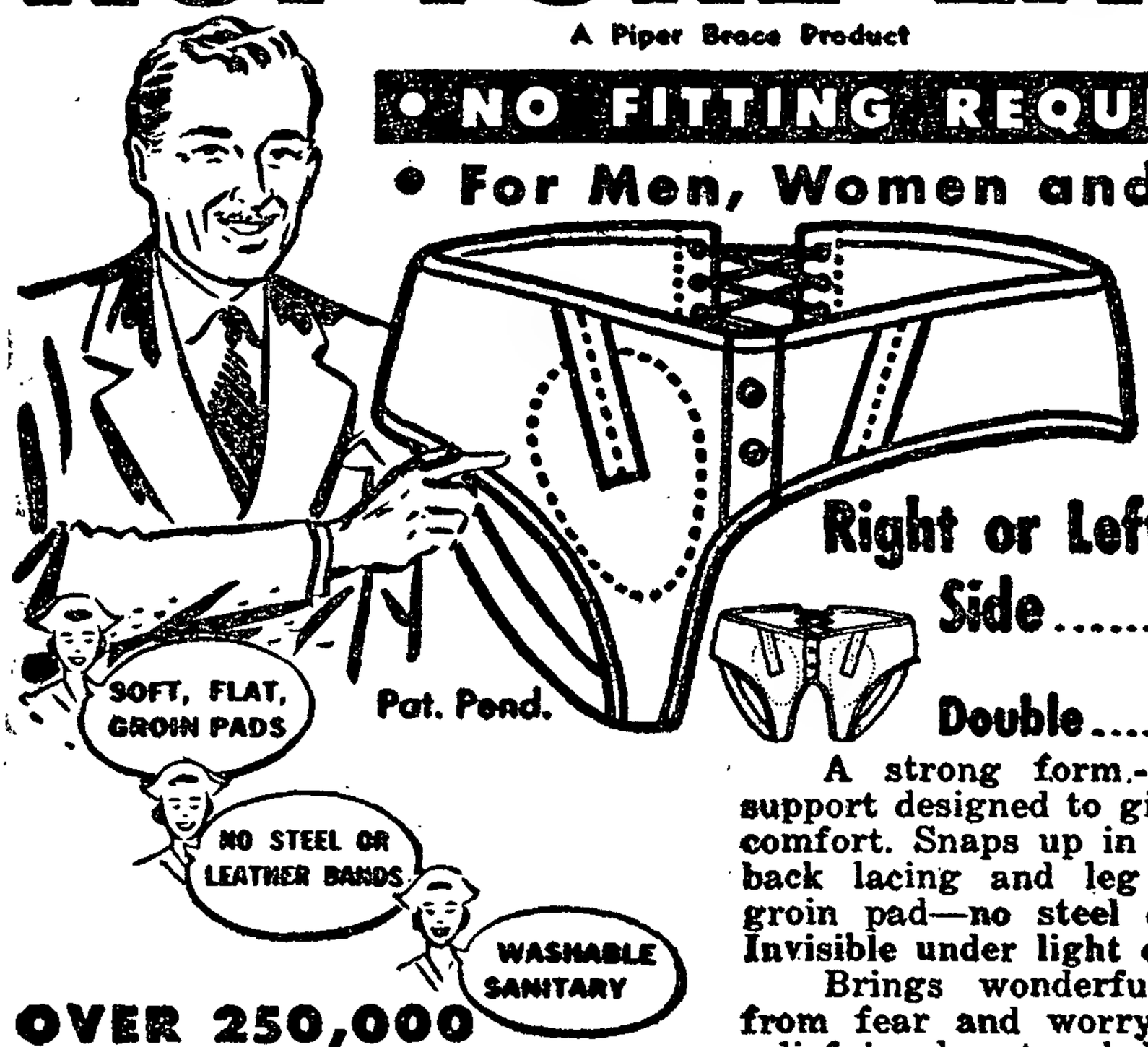

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as Costigan spurred his horse into the trees at the edge of the clearing, Lacey's bullet knocked him off his horse.

Then Lacey lost conciousness, and the next thing he knew was when he woke up, his chest stiff with bandages, in Sheriff Woodford's living room. Eva was sitting by the sofa, holding his hand.

He looked at her long and hungrily, and he saw something behind her eyes that added to the sparkle in them. It was as though she had just learned that things were fine and were always going to be that way.

He had a feeling that perhaps his efforts to save Woodford's job and his savings had somehow an effect on the thinking of the whole town as well as on himself, and he was glad that he was not going to think of leaving the place that was home to Eva and to himself.

"You've got to hurry and get well," she told him after a while. "The businessmen of the town want to give you a supper."

"I won't go," he answered, "unless it's a wedding supper."

He reached up with the hand that was not bandaged to his side, and brought her head down to his, and the eagerness of her kiss was such as to shorten his convalescing time by weeks.

●

DAY OF THE LONGHORN

[*Continued From Page* 105]

back. They fought it out with the cattle thieves. Others turned their cattle to the east and came out in Arkansas. There they had to turn back north to avoid the Boston Mountains, which was such a rough country that they were afraid that they could never get the wild longhorns over them. They kept this up until they struck southeast Missouri and on into southwest Kansas.

There they found the northern mar-

[*Turn To Page* 126]

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That's what the boys shouted at me ONLY A FEW WEEKS AGO...
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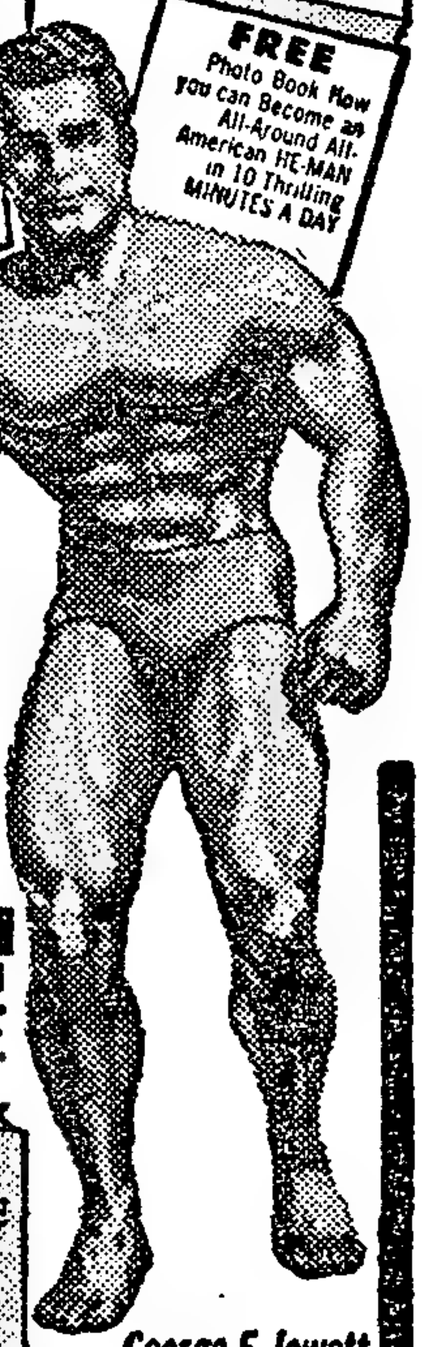
JOE YOUR NEW ENERGY AND APPEARANCE SURE DO A GOOD JOB! YOU EARNED YOUR PROMOTION.
JOE'S JOWETT HE-MAN STRENGTH AND BUILD WON HIM THOSE STRIPES



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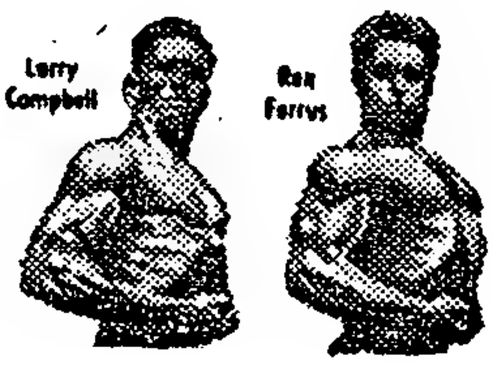

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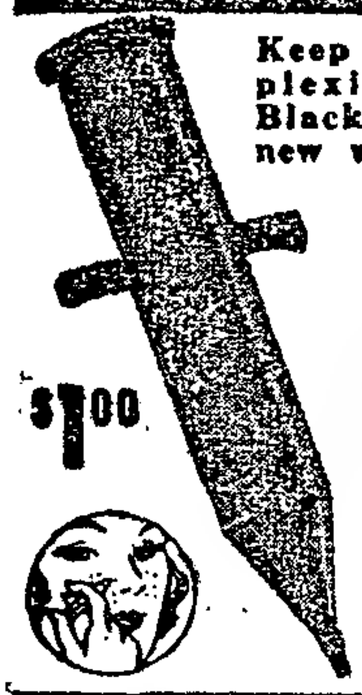

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kets booming, ready to take all of their cattle. Cattle buyers came out on the trail to meet them. Eastern people were starving for meat and beef was their cry. Railroad workers pushing the Iron Horse westward needed meat. The Indians who had lived off of the buffalo so long needed meat, their chief supply of meat, the buffalo, was gone. This was in the heyday of the longhorn. He was valued everywhere.

THE TRAIL outfits in the late sixties and the early seventies were plenty rough. They had to be to survive. The business of trail driving was new. It had to be developed.

Oxen were used to pull the wagons. When a steer tired out the cowboys roped another one and put it in. They had little grub and half of the time they were out of that and lived on the diet of straight beef.

The cow outfits then only furnished three or four horses to each cowboy. Most of them would be sore-backed as the old-time cowboy saddles were very hard on horses. The cowboys did not have any tarps, tents, or very few slickers.

The cowboys never kicked; they had been raised that way at home. They had lived on cornbread and bacon. They had lived in dugouts with dirt floors. That was the way all of the early settlers lived when they first settled on the plains.

Because everything was so rough and tough that did not stop the cowboys from bringing the cattle to Kansas and other shipping points. Old-time cowmen had said that in the year 1871, alone, 600,000 head of cattle came up the trail to southeastern Nebraska and eastern Kansas.

Besides selling the longhorns to eastern markets lots of the drivers sold their cattle to stockmen and in small herds to the settlers there.

The old-time cowboy, the hired man on horseback, had that unconquerable spirit which made the West a home, a decent place in which to live.

●

MAN IN GOLDEN ARMOR

FACT FEATURE by James Edward Hungerford

A QUEERLY-BEHAVING "mystery man" showed up in Yuma, Arizona, in the early 1860's, introduced himself as "Jim Johnson", and proceeded to toss twenty-dollar gold-pieces about recklessly in saloons, honky-tonks, gambling joints. For several days he was a sensation—the most popular gent in town.

Recovering from his hilarious binge hangover, he richly outfitted himself with camp-supplies and grub, hired a town loafer named "Pedro", as a guide, and announced he was leaving Yuma for Sonora, over the Mexican Border.

A couple of days later, a traveling Yuma citizen, Jim Barton, came across Johnson and his guide, Pedro, in the Arizona Desert. Barton warned Johnson that if he was carrying considerable money on his person —as he obviously was, judging from his recent spending-spree in Yuma—the desert country between Yuma and Sonora was dangerous, outlaw-infested territory to travel.

Sprawled, half-drunk, by his campfire, Jim Johnson scoffed at the warning. "Damn thievin' outlaws won't bother me none!" he boasted recklessly. "I'm plumb protected agin' bullets an' knives! If you don't believe it, pardner, jest feel me over!"

Jim Barton ran a hand over Johnson's shirt, and beneath the garment he felt some hard, oval, disc-like pieces of metal.

"Twenty-dollar gold-pieces!" chuckled Johnson. "I'm plumb lined with 'em, sewed to my undershirt an' drawers, under lappings of burlap thread! Ain't no outlaws' bullets or knives kin reach my hide an' puncture it, through the linin' of gold armor!"

Barton was astounded—and skeptical. "Those gold-pieces won't save your throat from being slashed, or prevent you from gettin' a bullet through the head," he warned grimly. "My advice to you is—turn

[*Turn Page*]

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back to Yuma, an' take a stage-coach to wherever you're goin'."

Johnson took a shot from a whisky bottle, and laughed off the advice scornfully. As it was obviously futile to give further warning to a man who advertised the fact that he was encased with gold, Barton left the fellow to his fate, in disgust.

As Jim Johnson proceeded on his journey through the desert toward the Border, and Sonora, he boasted to every traveler he met that he was "proof agin' bullets an' knives," and was plastered with an undercoating of gold twenties.

Luckily the strangers he encountered were honest.

Later, the body of "The Man in 'Golden Armor'" was unearthed from a desert grave, midway between Yuma and the Mexican Border. The "Golden Armor" was missing from the corpse. But there were plenty of lead slugs in the cadaver.

Johnson had encased his body in gold twenties to protect himself from guns and knives of outlaws; he was a thief himself—an absconder from northern Arizona, heading for Mexico, to squander his evil gleanings. A pursuing lawman identified the unearthed body.

"Pedro," Jim Johnson's guide, had killed his Boss, stripped him of his "gold armored" underwear, and buried him in the sand.

THE JAMES BOYS GO CALLING

[*Continued From Page* 89]

pistol after his release from prison. Cole lived until 1916 when he died at Lee's Summit, Missouri. Both Frank James and Cole Younger traveled about the country lecturing on "crime does not pay", for many years.

Bob Ford, who together with his brother Charley were the assassins of Jesse James, went West and established himself in business as owner of a cheap honky-tonk in Creed, Colorado, where he was killed in 1892 by a man by the name of "Red" Kelley. Charley committed suicide in a vacant lot in Kansas City by blowing his brains out—supposedly over remorse at his part in killing of Jesse James.

Thus ended the careers of some of the world's most famous bandits.

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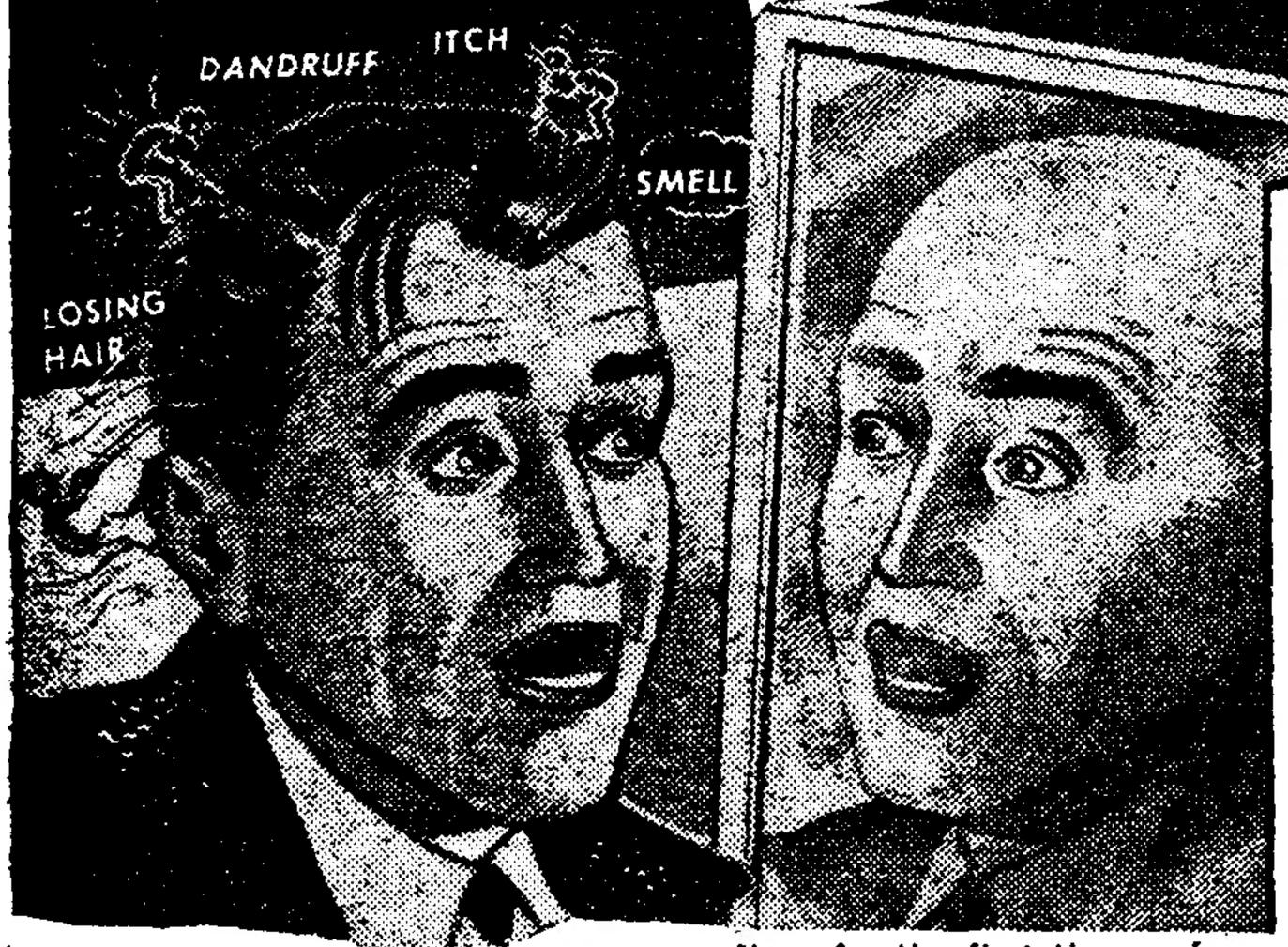

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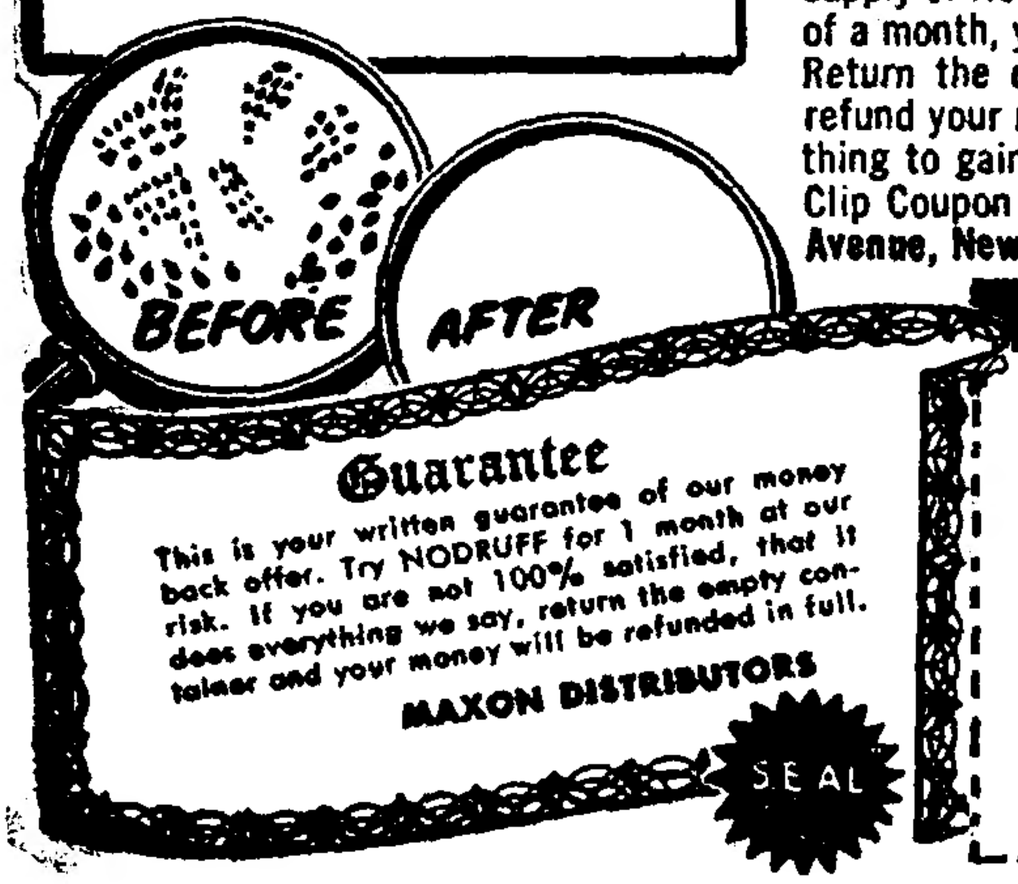

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TRAIL-BLAZER

WESTERN QUIZ by John Winters Fleming

FOLLOW the trail of twenty tips to the identity of a great American pioneer and see how many clues you need to name him. Deduct 5% for each clue you use up without naming him. We'd say 60% was a passing mark.

1. I was born in Leominster, Mass., on Sept. 26, 1774.
2. I hit the pioneer trail west in my teens and followed it all my life.
3. I always carried with me in my shirt bosom a New Testament which I loved to read.
4. I always carried with me in my heart a great love for all of God's living things.
5. I pursued an altruistic business of giving tiny life-bearing gifts to all who would receive them.
6. I wandered the Allegheny River country in western Pennsylvania from 1797 through 1804, always bearing with me my wee fruitful gifts.
7. I lost my family name in the Allegheny River country, and gained my nickname which has become famous.
8. I paddled down the Ohio River in 1808 to Marietta, Ohio, where I started 40 years of wandering in the wilderness.
9. I never ate meat during my wilderness wanderings, but lived on the fruit and plant food that nature provides.
10. I never carried any weapons, nor killed any living thing.
11. I feared no living thing, but loved them all, and so they in turn feared me not.
12. I talked with all God's animals, fed wolves from my bare hands, slept with bears in hollow tree trunks.
13. I was looked upon with friendly awe by Indians as I trod barefoot through rattlesnakes' lairs.
14. I once cleansed a wound of mine with fire and without showing pain, before the amazed eyes of Indians.
15. I often served as peacemaker between redmen and white.
16. I often saved settlers' lives when, failing as a peacemaker, I warned them of Indian raids to come.
17. I died March 16, 1845, in Ft. Wayne, Indiana, while sleeping out of doors under orchard trees as I loved to do.
18. I was found the next morning with an unusual light in my face, it is said.
19. I was a famous orchardist.
20. I planted many orchards myself and many blessings bloom today from the wee fruitful gifts I gave to thousands of others.

WHO AM I?

Answer:
I am Johnny Appleseed, born John Chapman.

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